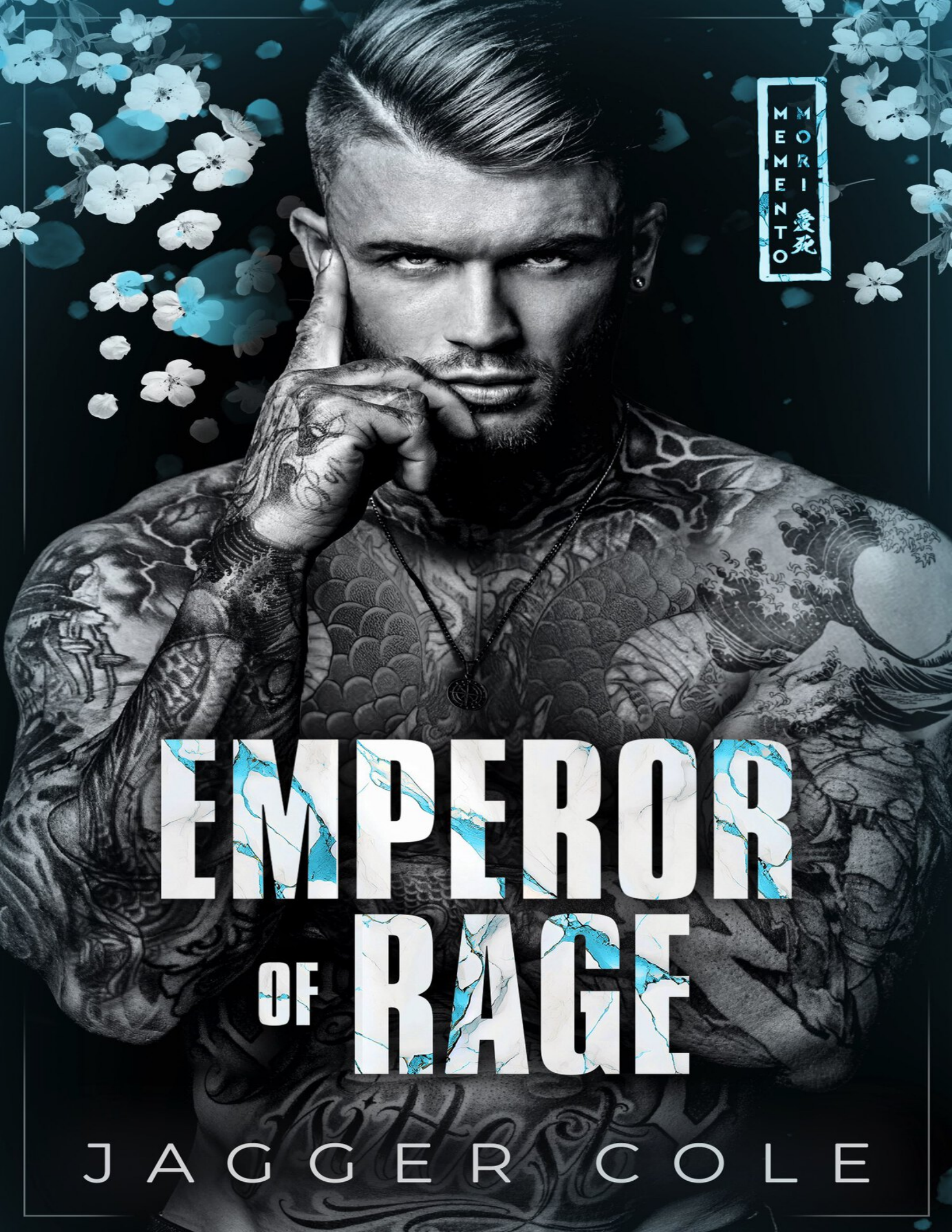
MEMENTO MORI
愛死
EMPEROR OF RAGE
JAGGER COLE

EMPEROR OF RAGE

A DARK MAFIA ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

JAGGER COLE

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Moments - Kidnap, Leo Stannard
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TRIGGER WARNING

Dear Reader,

This book contains darker themes and graphic depictions of past trauma and SA, as well as scenes involving somno, free use, and primal play.

While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. *Please* know your own triggers, and read with that in mind.

Thanks for reading,

Jagger

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1

FREYA

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED the dark.

The glow of the laptop bathes the room in a cool blue light, casting shadows along the faded, high ceilings of the Chelsea Hotel. These days, the once-infamous playground of artists, poets, and rock stars is now a luxury boutique hotel, nothing like it was back when Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen prowled the halls.

It's quieter now; more *refined*. But the ghosts of its history still cling to the walls. It's almost as if I can feel them watching me as I work, their restless energy crackling and humming just beneath the surface.

I fit in here—hiding in plain sight, playing in the dark.

As usual when I'm periscope-down in work like this, I've got my big clunky headphones on. Tool's *Schism* bleeds into Nine Inch Nails, blocking out the whole world around me. My fingers dance across the keyboard, tapping and clicking rhythmically, pulling me deeper into the task at hand.

I've been at this for hours, tracing barely-there digital footprints, looking for a thread to pull on.

Kir, of course, wouldn't tell me *why* he needs the financial records of a corporation that's been dead and buried for over a decade. He never does. But it's not like he's ever "keeping" information from me. He just doesn't "volunteer" it. And honestly, I don't always care to know, anyway. My job

is to hunt. To seek out. To uncover things that people think are lost and gone forever.

But nothing's ever really gone from the internet.

That's where I come in.

My job is to find the information; Annika's is to *use* it. Together, we make sure Kir stays one step ahead of whatever company he's acquiring…or whatever person he's crushing.

At first, we were his employees. Now, after all these years, my best friend Annika and I are essentially his family. Same goes for his nephew Damian.

Annika and I come from families and pasts we had to run from. Damian's was taken from him. Kir never had one.

Now we all have a new one together.

My eyes flick to the clock in the corner of the screen. Objectively, 2:13 a.m. is late for most normal people, even in New York.

But—spoiler—I'm not normal. Two in the morning is basically my lunch hour.

When your body hates sunlight…or is it that sunlight hates me?...the dark becomes your friend. Night becomes your day. This is where I live: in the middle of the night, safe from the sun, from normal people, and from the demons chasing my heels.

My eyes focus sharply as I stop typing.

I think I've found something.

Again, I don't ask Kir questions, I just do the work. If it's harder because there are walls up I didn't see coming, all the better. I love a challenge. But tonight is proving to be a little outside the norm.

Kir only said that the financial information he was after was—possibly—sitting on a server belonging to Orlov Financial Solutions. He never mentioned that Orlov Financial Solutions is a massive front for the

Grigorov Bratva family, one that they use for money laundering and predatory loans. But again, that only makes this more fun for me.

Annika likes to say it, and she's probably right: there's a massive, *massive* adrenaline junkie in me, and shit like this just feeds it.

I scowl at the screen again.

Shit.

I thought I had something there, but it's another dead end. Unless…

It takes me a second of wondering why the root folder is pointing toward files that don't exist on the system before it hits me: they *do* exist, just not on this network.

AKA, the files are on a computer or server at their offices that isn't connected to the internet.

Fuck.

I lean back in my chair, frustration bubbling in my chest. I've come too far to stop now. If the data I need isn't in the network I've hacked into but in the physical hardware itself, I'm going to have to go out there and get my hands on it the old-fashioned way: by breaking and entering.

I check the address I've already found for Orlov Financial Solutions—an older pre-war building in Hell's Kitchen. Typing quickly, I hack into the security system of a bodega catty-corner to the building, and then use their outside security cam to zoom in on my target.

The place looks like a shithole. There's a defunct laundry on the first floor, and a sign in the window of the third floor that says "rooms for rent". Though, the number Sharpie-d under it is out of service.

Yeah. This is one hundred percent a front.

It's also where I have to go right now if I want to snag those financial records for Kir.

I ditch the headphones and grab my black hoodie and black leather jacket from the back of the chair, putting them on over my thin shirt. I pull the

hood up to hide my face as I slip my laptop into a bag and shoulder it.

The city is a different world at night. Streets that are usually packed with tourists and locals are almost deserted, lit only by the flickering glow of streetlights and the distant hum of neon signs. A dull mist floats down from the night sky, and I keep my head down as I make my way to the car parked a block away, my boots echoing on the cracked pavement.

I start the Audi—thank you very much, Kir and his habit of paying *very* well—and the engine purrs softly as I pull away from the curb and glide off into the night.

I find the building easily enough. It's nothing special—just another crumbling five-story brick thing tucked away between two *other* crumbling five-story brick things. Some of the windows on the lower floors are boarded up. The paint's peeling off the front door.

I park a block away, slipping out of the car and drifting through the shadows like a wraith. The air is cool and heavy, the sounds of the city white noise in the background as I approach. There's no sign of life, no movement. That doesn't mean anything.

I've learned appearances can be deceiving.

The side door creaks as I push it open, the sound sending a shiver down my spine. The air inside smells of dust and rusted metal and decay. I take a dark staircase up to the second floor, glancing around to see the space is littered with old machinery and crates piled up against the walls.

I move carefully, my senses on high alert. The server I'm after—if it even exists—is probably at least *near* the computers I was able to access via the net. So I keep heading up the stairs looking for them. The second and third floors are empty. The fourth looks like it's a hangout area for exactly the type of guys who would guard an off-the-books mafia financial business—pool table, stale cigar smoke in the air, bar to one side, and X-rated centerfolds tacked up all over the walls.

I stop to snicker as I eye one of the blonde, surgically enhanced Playboy Bunnies with a spray tan and bolted-on tits.

My eyes swivel to check my own reflection in the grimy mirror hung on the wall next to the blonde. My gaze takes in the jet-black hair, the heavy, *heavy* black eyeliner and shadow intended to give my blue eyes as spooky and as sharp a glint as I can. The pierced nose and eyebrow, not to mention the collection of metal through almost every part of my ears. The generally pale, sunless complexion. The chest that doesn't exactly need a bra most of the time.

"What do you think, girl?" I murmur quietly, pulling my gaze back to the pinup. "Think I've got a shot at being Miss October?"

She just beams her pristine white, unblemished, perfect smile at me.

"Well, fuck you, too," I mumble back at her before I turn and head for the stairs again.

One more floor to go.

It's on that top floor where I finally hit paydirt. The big open space is set up roughly like an office. There's a receptionist desk, some cubicles, a water cooler, a walled-off corner office. Even some generic "office art" hanging on the walls.

I could use any of the cubicle computers to be inside their system in seconds. But it's not going to help me. The information I need isn't *on* their system, but on a machine intentionally left unconnected to the web so that people like *me* can't get to it.

I'm betting on it being a shitty old piece of hardware collecting dust in a back room somewhere.

There's nothing in the walled-off office, though. Or in the copy room, or the break room. I'm exhaling slowly and grudgingly preparing to admit defeat when I stop and peer into the far back corner of the main work area.

Fucking *bingo*.

I tuck a lock of black hair behind my ear as I head over to what I'd at first thought was an old mini fridge. But then I pull open the door and see the flickering of LED lights, and my lips pull into a triumphant grin.

It’s not a fridge. It’s an ancient, super outdated server. One I didn’t see on their network, which means this is probably the one I’m looking for. I crouch down behind the desk next to the old server and pull out my laptop. I plug in directly, my fingers flying over the keyboard until a folder pops up on my screen.

I’m in.

I can sift through the the noise and bullshit later. For now, I just start copying literally everything off the old server onto my laptop. There’s not much, and they’re small files. But the server itself is old as shit, and the transfer is taking forever.

That’s when I hear it.

Oh, fuck.

Voices.

I barely have time to duck lower behind the desk and blacken my laptop screen before the voices get much louder, and many different footsteps enter the office.

“Okay, buddy,” an unfriendly Russian accent mutters gruffly. “We’re here.”

I slowly peek around the side of the desk. Across the room, four *very* Slavic-looking guys—two in shabby-ish suits and two in Adidas track pants and jackets—are standing in the doorway, facing me. Between us stands a fifth man.

A man all in black. Tall, with broad, menacing shoulders, his back to me as he faces the four.

“Indeed,” the mysterious man growls in a voice with a slight English accent.

I squint as I try to peer at him through the darkness. Is he wearing a hood or something?

“You said you needed to see the place before we talked money and investment. Well?” The Russian who appears to be the one in charge shrugs

his shoulders and glances around. “This is it, my friend. This is where the magic happens. You fucking happy now?”

“Not quite.”

It happens so fast that my brain needs time to catch up to what my eyes see. Faster than I ever dreamed a person could move, the man in black is reaching into his coat and yanking something out. The sound of steel across steel zings through the darkness, and the men facing him go pale as their eyes widen.

“*Fuck*—!”

The first of them chokes, the curse turning to a gurgle as the sword—the motherfucking *sword*—in the tall man’s hand slices his throat open. My hand slams over my mouth, my eyes screaming as I watch the tsunami of blood flood from his neck as his body drops like a mail sack.

The man in black doesn’t hesitate.

The second Russian goes down before he can even draw his gun. The third manages to get to his weapon at least. But he screams and drops it when the blade rams through his chest, ripping viciously out the side in another tidal wave of crimson.

I’m not squeamish. I’ve seen things that would turn most people into insomniacs. But this is something else.

It’s like watching a nightmare.

…But I can’t look away. The man in black brandishing the goddamn sword moves like a predator: deliberate and efficient. My eyes stay glued to him as he kills three of the men in seconds. I flinch as the fourth guy—the one that was doing the talking before—gets one shot off. But it’s wild and goes into the ceiling.

A second later, that gun—together with the hand that was holding it—is on the floor.

My heart thuds erratically in my chest as the man screams in agony, his face a horror show as he clutches the stump where his hand used to be.

“Good,” the man in black growls, his back still to me. “It seems I have your fucking attention.”

“Take whatever you want!” the Russian screams. “Take it, you motherfuck—”

“I don’t want your bloodstained Rubles, you dumb fuckwad,” the monster growls savagely. He grabs the Russian by the shirt collar, shaking him violently. “I want *information*.”

“I don’t know shit!” the Russian guy bleats, terror lacing his voice. “I don’t—”

“Wrong answer.”

I flinch, recoiling as the sword rams through the Russian’s foot into the floor.

The man screams.

“I’m going to ask you some questions, motherfucker,” the tall figure growls in that slightly British accent. “And you’re going to—”

The Russian man’s one good hand jams into his jacket pocket and whips back out, brandishing a small, snub-nosed revolver.

It’s a bold, dramatic move, but he doesn’t get a chance to see it play out.

The man with the sword sighs heavily, as if he’s bored, annoyed, or disappointed…maybe all three. His blade flashes, and I yank my eyes away just as he lops the other hand off the Russian. When the screaming turns to a wet gurgle, followed by a dull thud, my throat simply closes off.

Silence fills the room. Inside my head, though, my pulse is banging like a drum in my ears, my hands still pressed tight against my mouth as if to hold in my screams.

I hear a low, slow exhale. Shaking, I slowly peer around the corner. The man with the sword still has his back to me. And I swear, it *still* looks like he’s wearing a hood or something, but I can’t quite tell in the shadows.

He squats down, and I watch him clean his blade off on the dead Russian's jacket lapels before he stands and slides it back into a sheath of some kind under his jacket. My pulse is still racing, my eyes bulging wide and the small of my back slick with sweat as I watch the man casually step over the bodies and lean over the receptionist desk. He turns on the computer and starts typing away.

My eyes snap across the room to the slightly open door into the corner office. There was a fire escape out one of the windows when I poked my head in there before.

Shaking, I let my eyes snap back to the man with his back to me.

No, not a man.

A *beast*. A psychopath. A monster who just murdered four men right in front of me without a second's hesitation.

…It doesn't take a genius to know what he'd do to the one person who *witnessed* all that.

I glance back at the door to the corner office, my breath coming fast and shallow.

I can make it.

I shoulder my laptop bag, take a breath, and try and slow my racing, panicky heartbeat. My throat bobs heavily as I tremble and glance around the side of the desk again.

The monster is still leaning over the receptionist desk, typing on the computer.

Go.

Every nerve in my body explodes with energy as I spring silently to my feet and bolt for the corner office.

I make it three steps before the laptop bag catches a coffee mug on the next desk over.

My heart wrenches in slow motion, horrified adrenaline eviscerating me as I watch the mug sail off the corner of the desk and go crashing across the floor in a spray of coffee and shattered porcelain.

I freeze.

So does the monster.

And then slowly, languidly, as if he's not at all surprised to hear something, he turns.

My heart turns to ice.

He's not wearing a hood.

It's a *mask*: an all-black, almost wet-looking vinyl mask with two white X's where the eyes should be, and a line of smaller X's in a horrifying jagged line, like a nightmare smile.

As he looks at me, the neon lights from outside catch the mask edge on, making it glint monstrously as he half-tilts his head, looking directly into my soul.

He rolls his shoulders.

He cracks his knuckles slowly, and time freezes in the space between us.

His head slowly tilts to the other side, and I swear, that neon smile seems to grow even more sinister.

It's me who breaks the showdown first, whirling and bolting as fast as I can for the door into the office. I go crashing into it, skidding across the floor to the window leading to the fire escape.

It's locked. And bolted.

Holy fucking—

Pure, naked fear explodes through me like an atomic bomb as I'm grabbed from behind. The scream curdles, lodges, withers and dies in my throat as an almost inhuman strength yanks me around and slams me back against the second window, so hard I hear the glass crack.

A dark, malevolent presence invades my every sense, bleeding over my skin like crude oil spilling into the ocean. A tattooed hand wraps like iron around my throat.

The scent of leather, malice, and sandalwood surrounds me.

My eyes finally manage to force themselves open, and instantly I'm staring into a nightmare as the monster leers down into my face.

"Well, well, well," he growls in a savage, metallic, rasping snarl. "*What* am I going to do with *you*…"

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2

FREYA

FEAR EXPLODES THROUGH MY SYSTEM. Reality itself feels glitchy, like this isn't truly happening. Like I can't *actually* be in this situation.

The last rebellious part of me that refuses to go down without a fight tries to squirm and push away from him. But it's like pushing against a cement wall.

I shudder as his grip tightens with the kind of precision that tells me he's done this before. Many times. He's not closing off my air—at least, not yet—but the way his hand is wrapped around my throat unquestionably says that *he* is in charge. *He* decides whether I breathe or not.

Whether I live or not.

It's control. Total, unnerving control.

The cold glass of the window behind me presses against my back, the crack biting against the small of my back where my shirt and jacket have ridden up. I barely notice it, though. Every fiber of my being is fixated on the man in the mask standing in front of me.

Looming over me.

Twisting a knife into my very soul and psyche.

The terrifying mask covers his face completely, but even so, it's like I can *feel* his eyes on me. Like I can sense the way his pupils trace over my face,

down my neck, and then over the rest of me, moving slowly as if he's memorizing every inch.

I can't see those eyes. But I can fucking feel them, dark and intense, with a cold, graveyard iciness. A piercing stare that pins me to the glass as effectively as his hand on my throat.

I'm not going to survive this.

The thought slices into my mind as I stare into his blank, monstrous face. The office around us feels too small, the walls too close. My chest constricts, and I'm struggling to breathe, not from the pressure on my throat but from the pure, unadulterated fear that tightens its grip on my lungs.

"*Please*," I whisper, the sound pitifully small in the vast emptiness of the office. "I didn't see anything."

For a moment, when his non-answer drags on forever, I wonder if I really *am* in the hands of an actual monster. Something from a horror movie, like that creepy thing from *Pan's Labyrinth* with its eyes in its palms. I imagine somehow getting a hold of the mask and ripping it off only to find empty blackness behind the mask, because he has no face.

Finally, a low, dark chuckle escapes him, but there's no humor in it. His fingers flex slightly on my throat, just enough to remind me that I'm completely at his mercy.

My mind searches frantically for an escape, a way out. But there's nothing. No one. Just me and the monster who feels like death himself.

He tilts his head slightly, considering me, trying to decide whether or not I'm worth the effort of keeping alive.

"ID," he growls, his voice low and rough, the single word cutting through the silence like a knife.

For a second, I don't move. I'm too shocked by the sudden command. But then his fingers tighten around my throat.

I fumble in my jacket pocket, my hands shaking as I pull out my ID. It's fake, of course—one of several names I use when I'm going into situations

like these, or looking for another layer of anonymity online.

It's not *just* a fake ID, either. I've worked hard to craft these "personas". Each of them, including this one, will bring up a whole person if investigated.

But none of them trace back to the real me.

The monster with a hand around my throat snatches it from me with a speed that makes me flinch. I shudder as he holds it up to the dim neon light filtering in from outside.

"Karen Vanderschmit," he reads, rolling the name over his tongue. He sounds almost... amused.

I swallow hard, trying to hold onto the few shreds of composure I have left. "I'm just a temp!" I stammer. "Working for Orlov Financial Solutions!"

The way my voice breaks and quavers *isn't* actually thanks to my amazing acting chops.

I'm just that scared for my fucking life right now.

"I—I didn't see anything! I swear!" I choke. "I'll never tell a soul! Please, just let me go."

His head flicks up from the ID, pinning me with that same cold stare. I can feel him assessing me, weighing my words, like he's deciding again whether I'm worth the trouble.

My heart is pounding so hard I can barely think.

He steps closer, pressing his body against mine and pinning me even harder to the cracked glass behind me.

I can feel the heat of his body. I can smell the coppery tang of blood in the air.

"Do you really think I'm just going to let you walk out of here?" His voice is low, a dangerous purr that sends a shiver down my spine.

I shake my head, unable to form words. My mind is a vortex of panic and fear. Every instinct screams at me to run, but there's nowhere to go.

Nowhere to hide.

The hand still holding my ID lifts. He drags the plastic corner of it along my collarbone, over the black cotton of my t-shirt, down over my breast until it rests right on my heart.

My breath catches in my throat and I try to push him away again, but his grip tightens, easily holding me in place.

"*I didn't see anything*," I repeat, my voice trembling. "I'll forget it. I *swear*."

For a second, there's only silence, the weight of it pressing down on me like a physical force.

Then he leans in, his breath hot in my ear as he speaks using a low, dangerous tone that sends a chill through my entire body. "You know what I *hate*?"

I don't answer. I can't. I'm paralyzed by fear, my mind scrambling for something—anything—to get me out of this alive.

"*Liars*," he growls, his fingers tightening slightly around my throat. He taps my chest with the ID again before he raises it, pushing it up against the underside of my chin and forcing me to tip my head up. "And you, Karen Vanderschmit, are a *very bad liar*."

I'm about to say something, but I stutter to a stop when he slowly shakes his head. He slides my ID into his leather jacket. When his hand comes back out, empty, my pulse skips as he brings it up to cup my jaw, right above where his other hand is still gripping my throat.

The creepy, demonic mask tilts to the side as he cups my chin. His thumb brushes down the edge of my jaw, teasing over my skin in a way that's somehow both sensual and violent. He does it again, tilting his head the other way, still not saying a word.

Then he changes it up.

This time, it's not my jawline that he runs the pad of his thumb over.

It's my *lips*.

Something dark and dangerous twists inside of me as his big thumb slowly drags across my bottom lip, pushing it to the side. He does it again, sliding his thumb back the other way.

The whole time, he watches me. I can *feel* his eyes on me even if I can't see them, dark and predatory, daring me to resist.

But I don't.

I can't.

He runs his thumb across my lip a third time. This time, it pushes into my mouth. I tighten my lips on instinct, never mind total confusion as to what's happening.

It doesn't stop him. It barely even slows him down. His thumb just pushes harder, demanding entrance and pushing its way between my lips even before they go slack.

His thumb pushes deeper, grazing my tongue. My pulse skyrockets, my mind unable to process the fear and shame crashing together inside me like a storm.

"*Suck*."

Reality skews a little. I didn't just hear that, did I?

Then his mask tilts back to the other side, and I can *feel* the black darkness radiating from the eyes behind it.

"*Suck*," he commands again, his voice low and demanding.

I don't think. I just obey.

I'm shaking, but I suck on his thumb, tightening my lips around the digit. His thumb moves slowly in and out, teasing over my tongue and stroking it in a slow rhythm that sends all sorts of fucked-up signals to various parts of my body.

It's like a sick game of control.

And he's winning.

I *hate* the way my body betrays me, the way my mind spins with fear and something else I can't name. Something that coils deep in my stomach, dark and uninvited.

He's toying with me, I realize that. This isn't about killing me—it's about something else. Something far more dangerous.

His thumb pushes in and out of my lips, like he's *fucking* my mouth. Like it's his cock, not his thumb, that's enjoying the softness of my tongue and the suction of my lips.

I think he's done with his sick game when he pulls his thumb out. But then it's replaced by two thick, tattooed fingers, and I shudder as something dark twists deep inside of me.

The monster keeps the game going, pushing his big fingers in and out of my mouth, faster, deeper. I choke slightly, feeling my spit and drool coat his fingers and dribble out the corners of my mouth to run down my chin.

"Good girl."

Jesus.

The sensation is anger and shock. Shame and outrage.

It's also something else.

But I refuse to acknowledge what it is those words ignite inside me when he says them, his fingers sliding sensually from my mouth.

He wipes them absently across my lips, like the whole thing was no more than a game to him.

Then suddenly, without warning, his hand drops from my throat.

He steps back, and for a moment I think he's going to leave. Relief floods through me, my chest loosening as the adrenaline starts to ebb away.

But then his hand shoots out again, gripping my jaw with bruising force. He tilts my head up, forcing me to look at him, and the black malice behind his mask seeps into my very soul.

“You’ll keep quiet,” he says, his voice low and steady. “If you don’t, I’ll find you. And next time, I won’t be so...merciful.”

The threat hangs in the air between us, heavy and undeniable. I nod, unable to trust my voice. I want to believe that I can just walk away from this. That I can forget what I saw, forget the blood and the bodies, forget the way he made me feel completely powerless.

But I can’t.

I know I’ll never forget this. The overwhelming sensation of a malicious voice behind the mask, or the way he treated me like I was nothing. Worse, an amusement. A toy to play with.

His toy.

He releases me, and I press myself hard against the window, shivering and gasping for breath. My body trembles as I watch him exit the office and disappear into the shadows, moving with the same deadly grace that brought him to me in the first place.

It’s over.

I’m still shaking when I finally push away from the window, my legs unsteady as I stumble toward the exit. It’s not until I’m at the third floor that I realize I walked right over the bodies on the floor back there without even seeing them. I suppose my mind blanked them out.

Or maybe my mind has other things to think about right now.

The second I step outside, the reality of it all hits me. The cool night air does nothing to calm me down. My heart is still racing, my throat still feeling the ghost of his grip. The streets are deserted, the city asleep around me, but all I can think about is him.

The man in the mask.

The monster who could have killed me but didn’t.

Why not?

With a cold, violent shudder, I pull my hoodie tighter around me and glance over my shoulder before I hurry toward my car.

Every shadow feels like a threat. Every sound is amplified by my fear.

I fumble with the fob, my hands shaking as I press the button to unlock the door and slip inside. The silence of the car is almost suffocating, but it’s the only place I feel safe right now.

Safe.

I laugh, a short, bitter sound that echoes in the emptiness of the car.

I’m not safe, and I never will be.

Not anymore.

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3

MAL

FEAR IS A DELICIOUS SENSATION.

She might think I've vanished into the shadows, but I'm still here, watching. Waiting. She runs, just like I knew she would—a little unsteadily at first, her hands trembling as she fumbles with her car keys, her breath coming in sharp, ragged gasps.

I watch through the glass I cracked when I pinned her to it. Watch her scramble toward the black Audi, her steps uneven on the dark, empty street.

She thinks she's safe. She thinks she's escaped.

She's wrong.

I just enjoy a chase.

The night wraps around her like a shield, but I see everything. Every frantic glance over her shoulder, every flinch at a sound that echoes too loud in the stillness. She's running on adrenaline, trying to escape the memory of my hand at her throat. Trying to forget the weight of my gaze on her from behind my mask.

I'm still watching.

Even though I *do* enjoy a chase, I'm still not quite sure why I let her go. My grip tightens on the windowsill as I watch her slip into the driver's seat, her silhouette barely visible through the glass. The engine roars to life, and for a moment, I expect her to peel away immediately, tires squealing against the

pavement in her panic. But she hesitates, her face dimly lit by the glow of the dashboard. She sits, frozen, staring out into the darkness like she's waiting for something—like she's expecting me to come after her.

My jaw clenches.

I fucking *should*, and finish what I started when I first caught her. I should've killed her. It would've been clean, easy. No witnesses. No loose ends.

Why didn't I?

I've killed for less. Strangers, enemies, men who crossed me by accident. But something about her...the way she looked at me, defiant and terrified all at once...

I scowl.

I don't like this feeling. *Uncertainty*.

I'm not used to it.

My hand hovers over the hilt of my *katana*, the scent of blood from the men I cut down still hanging in the air.

The smell of death and the rush of violence don't bother me. They never have. It's the one thing I can rely on—holding the weight of death in my hands and knowing with absolute certainty that I can control it.

But her?

Not so much.

I exhale sharply, forcing myself to step away from the window. The shadows swallow me again as I move through the office, stepping over the bodies at my feet. Back at the computer I was on before, I finish copying everything off Orlov Financial Solutions' network to the thumb drive.

Like most times I go down this particular rabbit hole on this particular hunt, I'm not entirely sure what I'm looking for.

I hope I'll know it when I see it.

When I’m done, I glance back at Fedir’s hand-less body. There’s something comforting in the finality of death and the stillness it leaves behind. These men were dead the second they crossed my path. Not just because of who and what I am, but because of who and what *they* were.

Possible accessories to a crime I’ve been trying to solve for far, far too long.

This particular road may turn out to be yet another dead end. I’ll only know when I’ve analyzed the information I’m taking with me tonight.

I could dwell on the “what if” of Fedir and his men *not* being involved in this crime I’ve spent almost two decades trying to solve. I could even allow myself to get tangled up in the irony of being a monster myself, hunting monsters.

A criminal looking to punish other criminals.

But it’s different with this.

It’s…*personal*.

In any case, even if Orlov Financial Solutions and the Grigorov Bratva *weren’t* involved in the horror show of twenty years ago, I doubt the world will mourn a piece of shit like Fedir Gusev and his band of shitheads.

But she... She was a complication I didn’t expect.

I kick my toe absently at the body of one of Fedir’s men. Blood from his sliced neck stains the entire front of his tracksuit.

They had to die. But her?

I can still feel her pulse beneath my fingers, rapid and erratic. I can still see the flash of fear in her eyes when I pinned her against the window. It wasn’t just fear. There was something else.

Something darker that flickered beneath the panic.

It’s been gnawing at me ever since.

I stand, rolling my neck. I should walk away. From this shitshow, obviously. But from her, too.

…But I know I won’t.

THE DRIVE back to the apartment I’ve been using while I’m here in New York is quiet. But not quiet enough.

This city bothers me.

It’s too faceless. Too proud of itself for no real discernible reason. It’s filthy, and it’s a never-ending slugfest between the various underworld powers.

The tension bubbling just under the surface makes the very air stink. It’s suffocating. And fuck, it’s *loud*.

I’ve always preferred the silence, the way it wraps around me like a second skin, drowning out the noise of the world. It’s easier to think that way. Objectively, for a city of ten million assholes, it *is* fairly quiet right now. But tonight, that quiet feels oppressive, like the weight of that girl’s gaze pressing down on me, demanding answers I don’t have.

The name—*Karen Vanderschmit*—is obviously fucking bullshit. I saw the flicker in her eyes when she handed the ID over, the brief hesitation before she spoke. She was hiding something.

I’ll find out what it is. I always do.

Tonight’s little foray into the offices of the Grigorov Bratva was a two-for-one, technically speaking. On the surface, I was there on Kenzo’s orders. But my cousin’s attempt to dig into the world of the Bratva as we expand into this goddamn city was only my excuse for being there.

My other reason is my own.

Kenzo sends me to things like this—things that any of our *waka gashira* or even a common foot-soldier could take care of—because I’m *good* at them.

And by “things” I mean “fixing problems”.

Except now I have a new one.

As I drive through the mostly empty and yet still *too fucking loud* streets of New York, my mind drifts back to her face.

Specifically, the way she looked at me.

Most people break when they're faced with death. They panic, try to find some way out. But not her. She was scared, yes, and she did ask me *not* to kill her. But there was something else in her eyes. Defiance, and something else I can't quite place.

It's sticking with me.

Fuck, I should have made it clean. I should have left her dead on the floor next to those men, her blood mixing with theirs. But instead, I let her go. And now, she's a thread I can't quite cut loose.

My phone rings through the Bluetooth in the truck, and I answer without looking at who it is.

"Yeah."

When I'm greeted with nothing but silence, my brow furrows. But when I hear the slow, rhythmic breathing through the open line, my eyes snap to the display screen.

Unknown number.

Fuck. I know who it is.

"That time of year again already, Jonas?"

The heavy breathing silences sharply for a moment before he speaks.

"Well, you know me, Mal…" the voice from my past murmurs quietly, his tone raspy and gritty.

"I'd rather I didn't."

Jonas chuckles darkly and quietly. My lips stay thinned and unmoving.

I don't keep track of this date. I have no interest in memorializing it in any capacity. But Jonas does. And that's why this darkness from my past insists on calling me on this date, every fucking year.

“What the fuck do you want, Jonas.”

“To *remind you*, brother,” he hisses back. “To make sure you *never* forget the day you killed our father.”

“He wasn’t our father,” I say tersely, mechanically. “Nor are you and I related, at all.”

“Oh, but we are, Mal,” Jonas murmurs lowly. “We are forever—”

“Get help, Jonas,” I say quietly. “Stop letting that monster and the childhood he destroyed in us pull the strings on your life.”

Jonas is silent again for another moment.

“Just remember, brother,” he growls in his rasping tone. “One of these days, I will find something—some*one*—that you love. And I will destroy them, right in front of you—”

“Find help, Jonas,” I mutter. “And lose my fucking number.”

I hang up and kill the engine outside my temporary residence in Soho. For a second, I breathe in the silence of the truck, trying to purge Jonas’ voice from my head. Then I head inside.

The building is nothing special—just another loft-style building tucked among the trendy, cobbled streets of lower Manhattan, with most of the other residents being coked-out models or married guys coming to use their downtown fuck-pad.

For me, it’s just a place to disappear to when I’m forced to be here.

The moment I step inside, the comforting weight of silence settles over me. But even now, something feels off.

I toss my jacket onto the back of the leather sofa, moving through the darkened loft like a shadow. My thoughts are still circling back to her, to the way her body trembled beneath my hands, to the sound of her breath catching when I leaned in closer.

She shouldn’t matter. She *doesn’t* matter.

So why can’t I shake the image of her from my mind?

The monitors flicker to life as I drop into the chair behind my desk, the soft hum of the computer breaking the silence.

Time to put this ghost to rest.

My fingers move quickly across the keyboard, pulling up the surveillance footage from the office I just redecorated in blood. I didn't *just* download all those files. I set up a back door into their system, since I couldn't get in before.

This would be why I had to pretend to be a potential investor and let Fedir and his dipshits lead me right to the place.

Russians are *so* predictable like that. Flash some cash, and they get sloppy.

I frown as I peer at the screen, scrolling back.

There she is.

My lips purse and I steeple my fingers under my chin as I watch "Karen" slip in through the side door of the building. She moves with a caution that suggests she knows exactly what she's doing.

It's…professional.

"A temp", she called herself.

Yeah, *bullshit*. She broke in, and she was looking for something.

I let the footage run, frowning as I watch her scan the room, her gaze darting toward the back of the offices. She moves like someone who's used to being unnoticed, someone who knows how to slip between the cracks. That means she's dangerous.

I don't like loose ends. And I *hate* dangerous ones.

I watch as she sinks down behind a desk, infuriatingly out of view of any of the cameras. But I do see her pop up again a few minutes later, peering around the corner of the desk and quickly darkening a laptop when I walk in.

I watch myself neatly slicing and dicing Fedir and his men. Then her bolting and running, with me right behind her.

I watch her *squirm* as I wrap a hand around her pretty throat.

I pause the feed there, staring at her face—wide-eyed, terrified, but not broken.

She didn't break.

I lean back in my chair, fingers drumming on the armrest, replaying the scene in my mind. I could have ended it right then. I *should* have. But instead, I put my hand on her neck. I felt her trembling pulse beneath my fingers.

I let her soft, pouty lips wrap around my fingers and felt the wet softness of her mouth.

Then I let her go.

I'm still not sure why the fuck I did *any* of those things.

The question gnaws at me, but no matter how much I turn it over in my mind, I can't find the answer. Maybe there isn't one. Maybe I just wanted to see what she'd do. Maybe the monster inside of me sometimes just gets fucking *bored*.

Maybe I wanted her to run to see how far she'd get before I caught up to her.

I turn off the computer, the screen going dark as I lean forward, my fingers tapping the edge of the desk thoughtfully.

I'll find her again. And when I do, there won't be any hesitation.

Next time, she'll know exactly who she's dealing with.

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4

FREYA

I'VE NEVER LIKED HOSPITALS. They're always so bright. So sterile.

But I'm not here for me. I'm here for Damian.

One of the perks of visiting the hospital *long* after visiting hours are officially over is that there's no one here. I mean, yeah, there's the patients, and the doctors, the nurses, the support staff and all that. But the doctors and nurses know exactly what they're here to do, and how they're going to do it. The patients have their shit together, too. They're here to get better.

It's the visitors that screw up the vibes at a hospital. The *tourists*.

But at one in the morning, the floor is basically a ghost town.

Perfect.

The long fluorescent hallway stretches ahead, the white tiles gleaming under the harsh light. I slip my hood off as I pass the nurses' station, seeing the older woman with kind eyes and a smile that never fades, no matter how many patients or how much misery she sees in a day. She glances up from her clipboard as I walk by, her face lighting up when she spots me.

"Well, look who it is," she calls out, her voice soft but warm. "How are you doing today, hon?"

I smile as I slip my bag off my back and unzip the front pocket. "Hey, Delores."

“You know, if you’re here any more frequently, people are going to start thinking you work here,” she chuckles.

“That, or they’re going to start asking why *you* keep letting me in when it’s not visiting hours.”

Visiting hours are much, much earlier. As in, when the sun is still out.

That’s a no-go for me and my xeroderma pigmentosum.

I know, it sounds like a spell from Harry Potter. It’s not. It means I’m allergic to the fucking *sun*.

I mean, I’m not a total vampire. I *can* go outside when it’s daylight. It’s just that to do so, I literally have to cover every inch of my body in something thick enough to keep the UV rays off my skin. If not, I’ll burn like a marshmallow that somebody forgot in the campfire. It *sucks*.

The first time I slipped in here after hours, Delores was the nurse on duty. I gave her a sob story about not being able to come earlier, and she took pity on me. The next time, though, she smelled bullshit.

The third time, I kept in mind the Fleetwood Mac pin she always wears on her ID lanyard, and brought her a framed microphone stand scarf signed by Stevie Nicks.

Yeah, I totally bought Delores’ love.

No, I’m not ashamed to admit it.

“You here to see Mr. Sexy?”

I make a puke face. Delores howls with laughter.

“Hey, if he didn’t want the nickname, he should’ve been an uglier coma patient. Just saying, hon.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, that’s my brother we’re talking about?”

Delores snorts. “You keep saying that, and I keep seeing zero resemblance—”

“Well, he’s *basically* my brother,” I smile. “How’s he doing?”

“Same as usual, honey.”

Damian is pretty much the reason behind all the upheaval in my and Annika’s world these days. A couple of weeks ago, Damian and a handful of Nikolayev men walked into a club only to find Aoki Jura, head of the Jura-kai Yakuza, waiting for him along with some of *his* men.

They were ready to fight.

Tensions have been running high for a few months between the Russians and the Japanese in New York: specifically, between the Nikolayev Bratva—Kir’s empire, which I both work for and am basically family with—and the Mori-kai, aka Kenzo Mori’s empire, which has been aggressively expanding into the city.

It all came to a head when Aoki took one look at Damian and pulled a gun. Twenty seconds later, Aoki, three of his men, and two of Kir’s were dead, and Damian was very close to it.

That shootout is why my best friend Annika is being forced to marry the dark, dangerous, and broody Kenzo Mori: to repair the bad blood between the Yakuza and the Bratva before everyone tears each other apart.

I feel for Annika, I really do. She and Kenzo already have a not-so-great history: I mean, she *did* rob him five years ago, and it would appear he hasn’t let that go. But even so, the real victim here is lying in a hospital bed down the hall in a medically induced coma while the doctors wait to make sure they got all the bullet fragments out of his chest.

Delores sees the faraway look in my eyes and walks out from behind the nurses’ station to give me a hug.

“Let me tell you something, honey. Two kinds of people come through the ICU: quitters, and fighters. The quitters just don’t have it in ’em. They’re done. There’s nothing left in the tank. But the fighters?” She smiles warmly at me. “They just won’t quit. That’s what you need when they wheel you in here. And that pretty brother of yours?” She winks. “He’s a fighter. He’ll come around. You’ll see.”

He’d better.

“Brought you something.”

What? So I’ve *continued* to buy Delores’ love. But in fairness, she’s got great taste in vinyl. I pull the ultra-rare French pressing of Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumors*, the one with the typo in the liner notes and Christine McVie incorrectly credited as the drummer on “Gold Dust Woman”. I found this gem at a vinyl shop in Brooklyn a week ago, and it had Delores’ name all over it.

Her eyes go wide when I slip it out of my backpack and hand it to her.

“Where on *Earth* did you find this?!” she says breathlessly.

“A magician doesn’t reveal her secrets,” I grin.

Delores hugs me tightly before pulling back to beam at me. “You’re a peach, Frey. Izzy is going to freak when I show her.”

Izzy is Delores’ granddaughter, and they apparently bond over Fleetwood Mac. Delores also loves to tell me that I remind her of Izzy since we’ve both got “that goth thing going on”.

Izzy is *fifteen*.

I’m not sure what that says about my fashion choices, but I like to think of it as Izzy being cool beyond her years, not me dressing like an edgy teenager.

“I should go check on him,” I say, glancing down the hall to Damian’s room.

Delores nods. “Say hi on your way back out. And get some sleep, hon. You look like you could use it.”

I force a smile, nodding again. “I’ll try.”

We both know I won’t.

I leave Delores and walk toward Damian’s room, the tension in my body mounting with each step. The door creaks softly as I push it open…and there he is, lying in the same hospital bed he’s been in for weeks.

Unmoving.

Silent.

The rhythmic beeping of the machines is the only sound in the room, the steady rise and fall of his chest the only sign he's still alive. I pull the chair up to his bed, the metal legs scraping lightly against the floor. My hands shake as I sit, my fingers brushing over the cool, pale skin of his hand. He's usually so warm, so full of life. Now he feels cold. Too cold.

I hate this.

For a while, it was just Annika and me. Well, before *that*, there was the nightmarish time when I was alone on the streets, after I ran from the family I was done with and my monster of a father.

But then I met Annika. She was older, tougher, smoother, and already had a few years by herself on the streets under her belt. She likes to say we took each other under our wings, but it's more lopsided than that.

Together we made quite the team, between her skills at taking things that didn't necessarily belong to her and my skills with a computer. We started to make a real name for ourselves in the underworld as thieves for hire, and we were just starting to bite off more than we could perhaps chew.

That's when we met Damian. And by "met" I mean we stole his Rolex at a fancy dinner party we were posing as catering staff for. We robbed that place *blind*. Then, when we were having our celebratory drinks down the street, Damian found us.

He *did* want his watch back. But he also wanted to be partners with us.

Damian, as Kir Nikolayev's nephew and heir, had connections in the underworld Annika and I could only dream of. Built, six-foot-three, frighteningly handsome with a leering, devilish smile, he had a thirst for adrenaline and breaking the rules similar to ours, not to mention a fondness for taking things that didn't belong to him. The only difference was, Annika and I stole because we were good at it and liked the thrill of the hunt—and because for a long time it was how we survived.

Damian likes to steal because he enjoys inflicting pain on people who he thinks deserve it.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees, my gaze fixed on his face. His white hair—which, like his violet-hued eyes, is the product of a rare genetic pigmentation condition—is untidy, but pushed back from his face. His sharp, dramatic features are softened by the stillness of his medically induced coma.

He's always looked otherworldly, between those violet eyes and ghostly hair. Now, he looks more statue than man.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, my voice breaking the silence.

I don't know why I'm apologizing. Maybe it's because I feel like I should have done something—anything—to stop what happened to him. Maybe it's because, deep down, I know that if things had been different, and if Annika and I had never crossed paths with him, I might not be sitting here at all.

I close my eyes. But as I do, the image of the masked man flashing behind my eyelids. I've been trying to push it out of my mind, but it's been haunting me.

He's been haunting me.

I open my eyes again, staring at Damian's still form. "I saw someone," I murmur, the words tumbling out before I can stop them. "I was doing a job for Kir, and I saw a man. He... He killed four guys right in front of me. I thought he was going to kill me, too."

My throat tightens. This is the exact conversation I'd be having with him if he was awake. I wasn't exaggerating with Delores: Damian really *is* like a brother to me.

"But he didn't. He just let me go."

I shake my head, trying to make sense of it.

"I don't know why. I don't even know who he was. He wore a mask—this creepy fucking vinyl thing with X's for eyes and a mouth. Total professional, too. Like he'd done this a hundred times. He saw me, and grabbed me…"

I trail off, the confession sticking in the back of my throat. I'm not telling Damian that in the moment when I thought I was going to die, part of me didn't feel fear but...something else.

Even if he *is* in a fucking coma.

I press my palms to my eyes, fighting back the wave of confused shame that threatens to drown me.

"I'm a mess," I mutter, leaning forward until my forehead touches the edge of the bed. "I know you'd tell me to stay the hell away from him. That I was crazy for feeling anything except terror. And you'd be right."

I lift my head, looking at him again. His chest rises and falls steadily, in time with the machines' beeping and whirring, but he doesn't stir. I don't even know why I'm saying this out loud. It's not like he can hear me. But something about his presence, even in this state, makes me want to spill my darkest secrets.

"I know he's dangerous," I whisper, the words leaden in my chest. "But I can't stop replaying it…"

My voice trails off, the rest of the sentence, the thought that has been gnawing at me for days now, left unsaid. It's wrong, and I know it. I hate it. But I can't shake it.

I can't shake *him*.

I sit there for a long time, the silence pressing down on me like a physical force. Eventually, I pull away, standing and smoothing out the wrinkles in my jacket. I take one last look at him before turning toward the door.

"Love you, dickhead. See you soon," I whisper. "You'd *better* get fucking better."

"PSST."

I jump a little, whirling at the hissed voice coming from the bushes next to the sidewalk. My brows furrow as I peer closer, then I relax when I see who it is.

“There’s a flight to Paris leaving JFK in like two hours,” Annika mutters. “We’ve still got connections there. We could cash out, disappear, move to Tunisia—”

“Seems pretty shitty to leave Kir without saying goodbye.”

My best friend scowls as she steps out of the bushes.

Okay, she might be the world’s most reluctant fiancée for this shit-show of an engagement party tonight. But she looks *amazing*: a floor-length green satin gown that angles across her chest, giving a classy-ass flash of cleavage. The satin hugs every freaking curve on her tall, slender frame, cinching in at the waist before flowing out over her hips and butt. A slit cuts dramatically high on her thigh, giving a teasing glimpse of her long legs and the strappy gold and pearl heels on her feet.

I whistle wolfishly.

“Dude, you look *hot*.”

She rolls her eyes. “Thanks.”

“That the hot little number your new gal-pal Hana picked for you?”

I grin at her. I’ve been giving her shit ever since she went dress shopping with Kenzo’s super put-together type-A sister, Hana.

“It is.” Annika smirks, eying my outfit. “I see you managed to find a new way to pair black with…black.”

I grin. “I know you’re trying to be an insulting cunt, but I’ll take that as a compliment. Thank you.”

Annika *has to* dress up for tonight. This whole engagement party thing *is* sort of part of the deal with her arranged…thing…with Kenzo.

I, on the other hand, have opted to thumb my nose at the dress code hard enough for both of us.

My look for the evening is somewhere between “Morticia Addams at a funeral” and “edgy Disney villain”, with a heavy nod to Helena Bonham Carter. My all-black—*vintage* velvet, I might add—dress falls all the way to the ground, with long wizardy-looking sleeves. The plunging neckline would normally be a bit much for me, but the obscene amount of cleavage is covered with fishnet material built into the dress.

I’ve completed the look with shiny black Doc Marten boots and my favorite spiked choker.

Annika grins at me. “Okay. You actually do look fantastic. *Very* ‘it’s-not-a-phase-Mom’. I love it.”

“Thank you,” I grin back. “The highest form of flattery.”

Annika clears her throat. “So, airport. You in?”

I grin at her. “You know it. Ride or die, bitch.”

She smiles wryly before she sighs. “Guess we can’t exactly skip out of this one, can we?”

I shake my head. “Unfortunately, no. At least, not without setting off world war three.”

“That would seriously ruin Kir’s weekend.”

I grin. “Right. And I mean, I can’t really see him dishing the same sort of gossip to Damian when he goes to visit that we do.”

Annika snorts. “Totally.” She clears her throat, scowling as her tone shifts lower. “*Yeah, uh, what’s up, nephew. I’m always a big grump for no real reason. It’s sooo hard being super rich and powerful, and really handsome, and having no interest in anyone of the opposite or even the same sex.*”

I laugh loudly at her terrible Kir impression. To be fair, it’s tough to nail his peculiar mix of Russian and British accents.

Annika sighs, turning to look up the street to where this shit-show is already underway. The party is being held at Sota Akiyama’s Village home: a mix of classic New York brownstone and old-school Japanese design.

I know *a lot* about the Mori family. You should always know your enemy.

Sota is basically Kenzo's version of Kir, kind of like his mentor figure. The head of the Akiyama-kai Yakuza isn't *actually* Annika's fiancé's father. But he was the best friend of Kenzo's biological father, Hideo. Hideo successfully escaped the Yakuza lifestyle and came to America, and when Kenzo moved back to Japan to rediscover that side of his heritage, Sota took him in like a son.

Any normal person would have A, gotten angry, B, maybe tried seeking revenge, but then C, eventually *given up and taken the fucking loss* after being robbed by Annika five years ago.

Not Kenzo.

He's spent the last five freaking years hunting her—and by proxy, *me*—down after she stole a necklace from him, after drugging him in a Kyoto cocktail bar five years ago.

I mean, let it go, dude.

His father, Hideo, wasn't even aware of Kenzo's and his siblings' existence, since their mother, Astrid, a Norwegian socialite, kept it all from him.

First she had Kenzo, and disappeared from Japan to her family's estate in England. Some years later, Astrid went *back* to Japan to try and rekindle things with her old flame.

She didn't quite manage that. But she did leave Japan pregnant for the second time, this time with twins: Kenzo's brother Takeshi, and his sister, Hana.

There's one more Mori kid in the mix: Mal Ulstäd. Technically, he's Kenzo, Hana, and Takeshi's cousin, since his mother was Astrid's sister, but he grew up with the Mori siblings as virtually a brother to them all. Now he's one of Kenzo's top advisors in the Mori-kai.

He's someone I plan on avoiding entirely tonight.

We've never met. He has no idea who I am.

But I know who he is. More specifically, I know who his family *was*.

…And what mine did to them.

I shiver, exhaling the dark, broken memories of a life I left a long time ago. When I slowly inhale again, filling my lungs with crisp fall New York air, it's as the girl I am now: Freya Holm.

And I'll never look back on the darkness I came from.

I frown as another scent invades my nostrils. I turn and glare at Annika when I see her puffing on her stupid e-cigarette.

"You look ridiculous sucking on that thing, you know."

Annika takes another long drag of it, smirking around the vape as she holds up her middle finger.

"Hi, yeah, *slightly* stressed right now. Think I could indulge in my go-to stress reliever in peace?"

"Hi, yeah, don't want my best friend to die from cancer, thanks."

Annika groans, rolling her eyes and taking one more puff before she slips the vape back in her clutch.

"I'm quitting, okay?"

I sigh as I pull her in for a hug. "Look, we have to go in there. So let's just rip the Band-Aid off and do it. Then we can figure out how to get you reconstructive facial surgery and smuggle you into Tunisia."

"*Fine*," Annika grumbles. She nods her chin past me to Sota's brownstone and the guests pulling up out front before making their way through the small crowd of both Yakuza and Bratva security. "You go ahead. I'm going to…get some air."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, cancer air."

"Eat me."

I giggle as I turn and leave Annika to her gross habit. At the front door, three Yakuza guys are waving wands over guests, like we're going through airport security. One of them, a taller Japanese guy with a goatee and

Yakuza ink snaking up his neck, frowns when he sees me, stepping in front of me and shaking his head.

“No,” he growls.

I arch a pierced brow. “Excuse me?”

“Sota-san has a strict dress code for this evening,” he mutters, his reproachful gaze sweeping back over me. “You do *not*—”

“She’s fine.”

The sound of the voice behind me is proof that it *is*, in fact, possible to be simultaneously relieved and annoyed by someone’s presence.

I exhale slowly, pasting a smile on my face as I turn toward Dimitri, one of Kir’s enforcers.

Dimitri has asked me out no less than ten times over the past two years, and still doesn’t comprehend “no” as my answer.

He’s not a bad guy. But number one, I would *never* mix my personal life with my professional one, and we both work for Kir’s organization. And number two…ah, fuck it.

There doesn’t have to be a number two. I just don’t want to go out with the guy, and it would be *fantastic* if he got that memo.

When I turn to him, he sends me what I’m sure he thinks is his most charming smile. Maybe it *is* his most charming smile. But…how do I put this…Dimitri’s been punched in the face a lot. And it shows.

That said, it’s *not* his lopsided and somewhat awkward smile that puts me off from dating him. It’s—

I flinch when Dimitri sidles up close to me and wraps his hand around the nape of my neck in a way that makes my stomach roil.

Yeah.

That would be the reason I have no interest in the guy. Forget his general thuggish demeanor and the way he barks at most people: he has this habit of touching me all the time, *despite* me asking him repeatedly not to.

“Come, Freya,” he growls in his thick Russian accent. “I’ll escort you past this filth.”

Dimitri grins smugly, leading me past the guards and toward the entrance by way of his meaty hand on my neck. Just before we get to the front door, the Yakuza guard stops him with an arm.

“*She* can go in,” the guy mutters. He turns to smile coldly at Dimitri. “*You* may not. No soldiers, from either side. Your boss and mine have agreed to this.”

“*Listen to me*,” he hisses at the Yakuza guy. It’s one of his less endearing traits. He gets downright angry when someone tells him he can’t do something. “I will take—”

“You know what?” I neatly slip out of Dimitri’s grip and turn to smile brightly at him. “*Since* you asked, I think I *will* be okay going in by myself.”

He frowns in a clueless way. “I never asked—”

“Have a good night, Dimitri.”

Before he can grab me again, I quickly turn and step into the house.

The sound of muted conversation and clinking glasses washes over me like a wave. I’ve always hated parties like this. Too many people…too many secrets lurking behind carefully crafted smiles. But tonight is different. Tonight, everything feels...sharper. Like the air itself is charged with a dark electricity.

I make my way through the crowd, my boots heavy on the marble floor. I feel on edge, like the latent anxiety in the back of my skull is poking its nose out of its room to say hello. For a second, I think of the little joint in my clutch and glance around for a balcony to escape to for a few minutes.

But that’s a terrible idea. I might not love that my best friend is marrying into the Yakuza. And I might have dressed like a walking middle finger for this shindig. But I *am* a guest here.

Plus, this evening is going to be tough enough to get through. Being a little stoned would probably make it a nightmare.

I decide to get a drink instead.

I make my way to the bar, ignoring the glances from the other guests. Some of them know who I am by way of Kir and are choosing not to engage with me. The other half has no idea who the gothy little weirdo is who just walked in looking like she's on her way to the prom with Marilyn Manson, but are *also* fine staying clear of me.

Suits me.

I get a vodka on the rocks—two lemons—from the catering bar set up on one side of the spacious, tastefully decorated main living room. I take a sip, savoring the burn as it slides down my throat.

It's only then that I feel it. A weight on me. A shadow.

Like I'm being *watched*.

I turn and scan the crowd, but no one stands out. Everyone's too caught up in their conversations, too wrapped up in their shows of wealth and power to notice anything else. But the feeling doesn't go away. It stays with me, burrowing under my skin, making my pulse quicken.

I glance around again, and this time, I tense when my gaze lands on a figure standing way across the room.

He's in a dark suit. Tall, with big, muscled shoulders, a chiseled, predatory jawline, and piercing ice-blue eyes.

…He's looking right at me.

Assessing.

Flaying open.

I slug back another heavy swallow of vodka.

Mal, Kenzo's cousin.

I recognize him immediately, not because we've ever met, but because, again, *know thy enemy*.

I pretend to look past him, like I'm just casually checking out the room, before I let my gaze slide back over him again.

A chill drags its claws down my spine as something malevolent emanating from him creeps and prowls its way across the room toward me.

The dark suit. The cold, sharp eyes. The way he carries himself with quiet, predatory grace. He's like a panther in a room full of prey, watching, waiting for the right moment to pounce. And right now, he's watching *me*.

My heart skips a beat. *Fuck*.

I take another sip of my drink, forcing my face into a mask of indifference as I thread my way through the crowd. I can feel his eyes on me the entire time, like a weight pressing down on my shoulders.

Mercifully, I spot Isaak, Kir's number two, across the room, and make a beeline for him. But just before I insert myself into whatever conversation he's having, I chance another look behind me.

…And my eyes instantly find Mal, staring right back.

Like he's watching. Waiting.

Readying himself.

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5

FREYA

SOMETHING'S WRONG.

Almost an hour into this fucking party, I can still feel it: the strange, prickling sensation on the back of my neck, like someone's watching me. I've always been good at sensing things like that, picking up on the subtle shifts in energy that other people ignore. It's a survival technique—one I honed growing up in an environment where danger lurked around every corner.

But this... This feels different.

Also, whenever I keep looking over my shoulder, expecting to see those piercing ice-blue eyes boring into my soul?

Nada.

Not a fucking thing. It's like I'm looking for a ghost.

I sip my drink, my eyes scanning the room for the hundredth time. The crowd has grown since I arrived, and the low murmur of conversation hums in the background, blending with the soft clink of glasses and the muted shuffle of feet on the marble floor. It's all very civilized. Polite. A display of power and wealth, disguised as a celebration.

But there's something dark beneath the surface. I can feel it.

My fingers tighten around my glass, my eyes flicking to Annika and Kenzo. They're in the center of the room, surrounded by a small knot of well-

dressed guests, laughing at some joke Kenzo just made. Annika's smile is perfect, her laughter light and easy, but I know her well enough to see the strain beneath it.

She doesn't want this. She's *never* wanted this.

The thought sends a flare of anger through me, but I force it down. This isn't the time.

I take another sip of vodka, the alcohol burning as it slides down my throat, and glance around the room again. That strange feeling hasn't gone away. If anything, it's gotten worse. Like the air itself is charged with something I can't quite name.

It's terrifying.

I turn back toward the bar, hoping another drink will help calm my nerves, but as I do, a figure moves into my line of sight, blocking my view.

Sota Akiyama.

He's dressed impeccably as always, his suit perfectly tailored, his silvery-white hair slicked back in an effortlessly powerful way that makes everyone pay attention. He's got that old-school Japanese gangster look to him, complete with *irezumi* style Yakuza tattoo ink peeking out of his cuffs.

He's also missing a pinky finger.

Yubitsume.

It means at some point, Sota had to make amends with his *oyabun*—his boss, before he himself became the man at the top. And when you need to make amends with a Yakuza boss?

You cut off your own pinky.

The Bratva has a reputation for being hardcore. But the Yakuza fucking redefines the word.

To be polite, I bow stiffly as he walks up to me. He smiles, chuckling quietly and shaking his head as he stops in front of me.

“While I appreciate the gesture of respect, there’s no need for that, Miss Holm.”

I arch a brow. Sota smiles.

“You’re surprised I know who you are.”

“A bit, yes.”

He nods. “You’ve had many people looking at you tonight, haven’t you, Miss Holm?”

I glance down at my outfit. “I’ve…noticed some interest.”

Sota chuckles quietly. “I’m sure. And I’m sure that was at least part of your goal.”

I clear my throat. “Sota-san, if I’ve offended you with my attire this evening—”

“Far from it, Miss Holm,” he says with that same polite smile. “In fact, I think this party—if we’re even calling it that—could use the sort of life a spiked choker injects into the conversation.”

I grin. “Thank you.”

He dips his head. “I too was looking at you.” He holds up a hand. “Not for any inappropriate reasons, I can assure you. And not for the same reasons others might have been. No, Miss Holm, I was looking at you because I’ve heard a lot about your…*talents*.”

My brow quirks up again as I sip my drink.

“I’m not sure—”

“Specifically with computers, and gaining information.”

I feel my cheeks heat slightly.

“Oh?”

He dips his chin again. “I have a similarly talented man in my family. Perhaps you’ve met Mal Ulstäd?”

I force back the shiver that finger-walks up my spine.

No, but he's been staring at me like he wants to either skin me alive or fuck me all night. Or both, in that order.

"I'm not sure I've had the pleasure," I say through a tight smile.

"Ah, well, he's quite good at what you do."

Interesting.

"And," Sota continues, "with your organization and mine setting aside hostilities, I was hoping I might be able to entice you with some employment opportunities. Provided, of course, that Kir approves."

I smile at Sota. "That's very kind of you to offer, Sota-san. I'm sure it won't be a problem."

He beams. "Excellent. That would be—ah!" He looks past me as the cold, chilling sensation returns, dragging like a blade up my spine. "Here he is. Mal—come and meet Miss Holm."

Before I can come up with a reason to extricate myself from this hellacious situation, I feel it—a shift in the air, like a gust of cold wind sweeping through the room. My heart stutters, a low pulse of dread rippling through my chest as I turn and follow Sota's gaze.

My breath catches in my throat and my body goes rigid as he approaches, each step measured and deliberate. The dark energy swirling around him is almost suffocating, like a black hole that pulls everything toward him. My heart races, but I force myself to stay still, tightening my fingers around the glass in my hand.

Sota smiles, the picture of charm and grace, when Mal finally reaches us.

"Freya Holm," Sota says, turning to nod at me. "I'd like you to meet Mal Ulstäd, Kenzo's cousin. Like the Mori siblings, I consider him one of my own children."

I swallow hard, trying to keep my face neutral. Mal doesn't say anything. He doesn't need to. The weight of his gaze is plenty. He watches me with an

intensity that makes my skin prickle, his eyes sweeping over me like he's cataloging every detail.

For a long moment, neither of us moves. Then, slowly, he extends his hand.

My pulse quickens, but I force myself to take it, my skin tingling when his fingers touch mine. His grip is firm, unyielding, and when I try to pull away, he doesn't let go. Instead, he holds my hand for a fraction of a second longer than necessary, his ice-blue eyes never leaving mine.

"Freya Holm," he murmurs, his voice low and smooth, laced with something…more.

It's not a greeting. It's a statement. A reminder.

Just then, one of Sota's men comes over and whispers something in his ear. Sota nods and turns back to me. "I'm afraid I'm needed elsewhere. A pleasure to meet you, Miss Holm."

"Likewise, Sota-san."

I'd shake his hand before he goes.

But mine is occupied.

Trapped.

Ensnared in Mal's powerful grip. He hasn't let go yet.

Sota smiles at Mal, claps him on the shoulder, and then follows his man into the crowd and disappears out of sight.

The silence between Mal and I is defeating. The energy around us throbs like a black cloud.

He's *still* holding my hand.

The moment drags on until it's gone a hair past "awkwardly strange" and become "downright uncomfortable". It's only then that Mal's hand suddenly drops, releasing me.

That's just the start of it.

I gasp sharply as he moves almost dead against me, his body practically pressing to the front of mine. My head spins as he leans his head down, his lips brushing the edge of my ear.

“Or is it *Karen Vanderschmit*. I confess, I’m a little confused.”

The floor drops out from under me, and the entire world goes still.

Oh God.

He knows.

Because he’s *him*.

The man from the other night. I’m almost touching the very monster who caught me that night. Who pinned me, and stroked his fingers over my tongue…

Heat explodes across my face. My core spasms as my throat closes off. And all I can do is raise my wide eyes to his, staring at him in awe and fear.

It’s either two seconds or eight hours that I stand there breathlessly, staring at him like I’m face to face with the devil himself. But when the moment’s over, suddenly, he’s just…*gone.*..turning and slipping back into the crowd like a shadow.

Two seconds. I’m pretty sure it was just two seconds.

That’s all it took for him to shake me to very fucking core.

I stand there, staring in the direction he’s gone, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Freya.”

I almost scream as I whirl, choking on my breath to find a confused-looking Kir standing behind me. He frowns, eyeing me like I’ve gone insane.

“Everything okay?” he murmurs in that dark, accented voice.

“Yeah, I—” I shake my head. “You just startled me. Sorry.”

He arches a brow in amusement before any trace of emotion drops from his face and he raises his wrist, tapping his Patek Phillip.

“It’s time. We’re signing it on the roof deck.”

He means the mafia blood marker that will seal—in blood, *obviously*—the agreement that Kenzo and Annika will be married, cementing the peace between the families.

“Oh. Yeah. Right…”

I blink, my brain foggy from what’s just happened.

From what I’ve just learned.

Kir frowns. “You sure you’re all right? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I have.

“Yeah, I’m fine…” I shake my head, forcing myself back to some semblance of normalcy. “Just… It’s a lot to take in.”

He smiles wryly, nodding. “I know. But it’s the only way we move forward without a war. Annika knows that. Just like she knows that if Kenzo Mori lays a finger on her or hurts one hair on her head, I’ll put him in the ground.”

I grin, biting my lip. “Thanks, Kir.”

He glances at me. “For?”

“Just…thanks.”

My movements are robotic, shock still pulsing through me as I follow Kir toward the staircase. A million questions are racing through my mind, but there’s no time to dwell on a single one.

Not now.

We reach the roof deck, the night air cool on my skin as we step out and join Isaak off to one side. The view from the roof of Sota’s home—New York’s skyline stretching out before us like a sea of glittering lights—is

stunning. But I barely notice it. I'm focused on the group gathered near the patio.

Sota stands beside Kenzo's twin siblings. Hana looks ultra put together with her dyed silvery blonde hair *perfectly* in place, making her look like the CEO of a space company in some sci-fi movie. Next to them, her twin, Takeshi glares as he watches over the entire situation like the savage, avenging lord of darkness and chaos that he, purportedly, is.

Kenzo and Annika are standing side by side, their expressions arranged in carefully neutral expressions as they wait for us to join them.

And past them all, lurking in the shadows with those cold, ice-blue eyes stabbing into me, is Mal.

The blood-marker—a mafia-world contract signed in literal blood—is nothing more than a formality at this point. It's already been decided: Annika and Kenzo are getting married, sealing the alliance between Bratva and Yakuza.

But as I stand there, I can't shake the feeling that something is about to go wrong. The air feels heavy with tension, and my mind keeps drifting back to Mal. To the way he looked at me. The way he said my name.

The way he touched me the other night.

I shake my head, trying to clear my mind as I take my place beside Kir. Annika glances at me. Her expression is unreadable, but there's a flicker of something in her eye that looks a lot like fear.

The ceremony is quick. Efficient. Kenzo takes the contract first, his hand steady as he stabs his thumb with the little pin set into the medallion of the blood marker, pushes his bloodied print to the page, and then dips the old-school style pen into the blood before signing his name. Then it's Annika's turn. Her fingers tremble slightly as she pricks her finger, touches the contract with it, then takes the pen, her gaze flicking up to meet Kenzo's for the briefest of moments before she looks down again.

She hesitates.

For a second, I think she's going to refuse. But then, with a sharp intake of breath, she signs her name, her movements jerky.

It's done.

The tension in the air thickens even more. My heart races in my chest, my pulse too loud in my ears.

Something is wrong. Something is wrong. Something is—

The sound of gunfire shatters the silence.

It happens so fast I barely have time to react. One second, everything is still. The next, the air is filled with the crack of bullets, the sound ricocheting off the buildings around us. Panic erupts, the guests scattering as the first wave of chaos hits.

But I can't move. I'm frozen, my body locked in place as my eyes fly to Mal's across the roof deck.

He's staring right at me. Perfectly still. Not even flinching when another shot rings out.

Like a machine.

A boogeyman.

A monster.

His expression is unreadable. But there's something dark in his gaze, something that makes my blood run cold.

And that's when I realize two things:

One, I'm in danger.

And two?

It's not from the bullets hurtling through the air.

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6

FREYA

THE LIBRARY IS TOO QUIET.

I can still hear the gunshots in my mind, sharp and deafening, piercing the night. My hands are trembling, and I clasp them together tightly in my lap, willing them to stay still.

I lean back in the high-backed chair, trying to focus on my breathing, reminding myself that for now, at least, I'm safe.

For now.

The dim light and the crackling fireplace in Kir's library do little to ease the tightness in my chest. Shadows flicker along the walls, gathering in the corners, heavy and dark. I glance out the window across the room. The view is nothing like the glittering skyline of Midtown. Here, in the upper outskirts of the Bronx, everything feels distant, far removed from the chaos I just escaped.

But even miles from the party, I can still feel the weight of Mal's gaze.

"Or is it Karen Vanderschmit. I confess, I'm a little confused."

He knows.

He fucking *knows*.

My fingers twist harder around each other. He knows what I saw, and that's more dangerous than anything else that happened tonight.

I shift in the chair, crossing my legs and tapping my foot against the floor in a futile attempt to shake off the residual adrenaline coursing through me. It doesn't help. The memory of his voice, low and dangerous, lingers in my mind, clouding everything else.

I press my fingers to my temples, rubbing small circles into my skin, trying to dull the pounding in my skull. After the shots rang out, Kir's men acted fast—removing me and Annika from the chaos and bringing us straight to Kir's mansion. Isaak, Kenzo, Takeshi…and yes, Mal…chased the sniper across neighboring rooftops. But they didn't catch him.

He threw himself off the edge of one of the buildings before they could, dying on impact.

Now *that* is a freaking professional.

For now, Kir's house is where Annika and I are going to stay, for our own safety. Kir's got a penthouse in Manhattan that he's already told us is going to be ours to lie low in until they can assess what the threat tonight was. But that penthouse is still being secured. In the meantime, this is where we'll be locked down.

But even here, surrounded by all Kir's protection, I don't feel safe.

Because of Mal.

He knows what I saw.

He knows *who I am*.

And now, all I can think of are Sota's earlier words, when he was telling me how he had his own person who was "good with computers, technology, and gaining information."

Mal.

Who knows my name.

How to dig for information someone's trying to hide.

Good god, what else is he going to find out?

I close my eyes, willing myself to relax. But all I can see is the look in his eyes when he said my fake name. A knowing look. Like he's been watching from the shadows all along.

The sound of footsteps pulls me from my thoughts, and I open my eyes just as Annika steps into the room. She looks like hell—her usual sharp, confident demeanor dulled by the events of the night. Her long red hair is loose now, tangled and unkempt, and her eyes are wide and dazed.

She collapses onto the couch across from me, running a hand through her hair. "I can't believe any of it," she mutters, her voice thick. "An assassination attempt? At *my* engagement party?" She huffs and feigns disgust.

Sarcasm as a defense mechanism is part of who Annika is. She's always been the strong one—the one who handles everything with cool detachment and, yes, maybe a bitter joke.

But tonight it's different. The cracks in her armor are starting to show.

"It was almost bound to happen sooner or later," I say quietly, leaning forward in my chair. "You're marrying Kenzo Mori, girl. There are people who don't want that."

Annika scoffs, though it lacks her usual bite. "As if *I* want that."

She goes silent for a long moment, staring vacantly at the floor. When she finally speaks again, her voice is softer than I've heard it recently.

"You know it's not just about what I want, Frey. If I don't marry Kenzo, there'll be a war. The Bratva and the Yakuza will tear each other apart, and Damian..."

Her voice breaks slightly, and her eyes flicker with something unspoken, something she's not ready to admit. For a moment, I see the cracks in her armor widen, see the vulnerability she hides so carefully. Then just as quickly, she shuts it down. Her shoulders stiffen, her expression hardens.

"It doesn't matter," she says firmly. "It's been decided. I'll marry Kenzo, and we'll keep the peace. It's done."

I watch her for a moment longer, wanting to press the issue, but knowing better. Annika's fiercely independent. Always has been. She won't open up until she's ready, and right now, she's not.

I let out a soft sigh, leaning back in my chair. "Well, I guess that's that, then."

Annika lets out a humorless laugh, sinking further into the couch. "Yup. That's…that."

We sit in silence for a while, the weight of everything settling between us. I want to comfort her, to tell her that everything will be okay, but the truth is, I don't know if that's true. The Bratva and the Yakuza have been on the verge of war for some time now, and Annika's marriage to Kenzo is just a Band-Aid over a gaping wound.

After a while, Annika stands, running a hand through her hair again. "Sorry, I'm shit company right now. I'm going to go to bed. I need to shut off my brain for a while."

I nod and she leaves the room, her shoulders slumped with exhaustion. The door closes behind her, and I'm left in the silence once again, alone with my thoughts of *him*.

I'VE BASICALLY BEEN STAYING in a non-stop rotation of boutique hotels since Annika and I landed in New York a few months ago. But I do have a room here at Kir's place, and that's where I retire to a few hours later.

It's large and luxurious, all dark wood and expensive fabrics. But right now its elegance feels suffocating. The weight of the evening's events presses down on me, a leaden feeling in my chest that refuses to ease.

I strip out of my clothes and step into the shower, letting the hot water play over my skin. I glance down as I soap myself, smirking wryly at the lettering tattoo across my ribs, right under my left breast.

Memento Mori.

Annika’s already heard my dark jokes involving her future husband’s last name being tattooed on my skin, and that maybe the wrong female ward of Kir’s is being forced into this marriage.

But the truth is, obviously, the tattoo has nothing to do with the Mori family. *Memento mori* is actually Latin for “remember you must die”.

Death is inevitable.

For me, that inevitability is just a little bit more real. A little bit *sooner* than most people, too.

I finish rinsing off, but I stay under the water. The tension in my body starts to melt away, the heat soothing my sore muscles, but my mind is still spinning.

Because there’s something that’s clawed its way into my head, and now it won’t let go.

And by some*thing*, I mean some*one*.

Mal knows. He knows that I lied. He knows what I saw.

I don’t understand. He could have exposed me at any moment tonight. But he didn’t. Instead, he just...walked away. Like he’s playing some game I don’t understand.

What does he want?

The thought gnaws at me, twisting in my gut as I step out of the shower and wrap myself in a towel. I sit down in the armchair by the window, staring outside. But I barely register the view. My mind is too preoccupied with Mal and the danger he represents.

My phone buzzes on the table beside me, and I reach for it, scrolling through my notifications absently. Nothing important. Just the usual noise. But my hand hesitates, and then I swipe over to the private browser.

Heat floods my face.

Speaking of dirty secrets…

I shiver as I open the bookmarks tab.

This is a part of me *nobody* knows about. I suppose Annika might have her suspicions, since we've known each other for so long. She certainly knows other odd quirks about me, like the fact that I'm almost always wearing pure, sensual elegance underneath my gothy, dark punk attire.

Lingerie—especially the extra fancy, luxurious Dita Von Teese type—is sort of my weakness. My one "girly" indulgence. Annika obviously knows about that. But she also knows I don't date, and I'm *sure* she's picked up on the fact that in the eleven years we've known each other I've never once mentioned or even hinted at sleeping with anyone.

That's because I haven't.

I think that makes it a bit of a stretch to think Annika knows how deep my darker side goes.

And it goes *deep*.

My core tightens as I scroll down to one particular video I've saved.

I make sure the volume is very low as I open the link and hit play, watching the familiar scene play out.

The girl on the screen gasps as a man grabs her from behind, his hand twisting a fistful of her hair. He shoves her to the floor, pinning her down as she writhes and moans and whimpers underneath his weight. He frees his fat, swollen cock, the massive, throbbing shaft bobbing in the air right in front of her before he yanks her close by the hair. He slaps his heavy dick against her face, and I can feel wet, needy heat pool between my thighs as she obediently and submissively opens her mouth.

It's a fantasy—one of *several* that I'd never in a million years admit to anyone—that I've played over and over in my head.

The needy craving for submission that I barely understand but can't seem to shake. It's something dark, something primal, and I *know* I should be ashamed of it.

I've never *once* played any of this out in real life. I mean, Annika knows, or at least has a pretty good idea, that I haven't slept with anyone since she and I have known each other.

She doesn’t know that that streak extends to *before* we met, too.

Heat floods my face, as it usually does when I consider the ludicrous juxtaposition of my darker, deviant fantasies against my card-holding “good girl” status as a fucking *virgin* at *twenty-six years old*.

But you can’t help what you want. At least, I can’t. The things we crave and desire in the dark recesses of our psyches are rarely things we’ve chosen. They’re just…*there*.

And mine cannot be ignored.

I tug at the towel, pulling it away from my naked body as my mind drifts, lost in the fantasy as I watch the scene play out on my phone. My thighs spread wider, and a small gasp escapes my lips as I run my fingers up my bare thighs toward my needy pussy.

And then, I feel it.

A coldness.

A darkness.

A malevolent presence.

I freeze as my breath catches.

“Don’t stop now, little thief. Things were just getting interesting.”

I almost scream. My heart lurches in my chest as I jerk my head up, my eyes widening in shock as they peer into the darkness of my bedroom.

There, standing at the far end of the room, half-hidden in the shadows, is a figure.

Tall. Dark. Broad-shouldered.

Mal.

“Well, well,” his voice is smooth and dark, dripping with amusement. “What do we have here, and more importantly, what am I going to do with you *now*?”

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7

FREYA

THERE'S NOWHERE TO RUN.

Mal steps out of the shadows, his tall frame blocking the only exit.

It feels like I'm going to hyperventilate and pass out.

I yank the towel tighter around myself as he stalks closer. The room suddenly feels smaller, like the walls are closing in on me together with him and his suffocating presence.

He moves with the same deadly grace I saw in the office, the same quiet confidence that says he knows exactly how to control the situation.

He's in black jeans, white t-shirt, and black leather jacket, and he prowls toward me like an animal. My heart slams against my ribs as I shiver and sink back into the chair. I wrap the towel around my body even tighter, curling my knees up away from him as if to disappear into the chair.

I should be feeling pure terror. Nothing but fear. But instead there's something *else* coiling in the pit of my stomach.

Something dark and shameful.

"What are you doing here?" I breathe, my voice shaking even though I'm desperately trying to inject it with confidence.

Mal doesn't answer right away. He stops a few feet from where I'm curled up in the chair, his eyes scanning me.

Slowly. Deliberately.

I can feel his gaze slide across my skin like a physical touch, making my breath catch in my throat. He tilts his head slightly, darkness swirling in those piercing blue eyes.

I grit my teeth, my fingers trembling against the fabric of the towel. “Answer me.”

He takes another step closer, his eyes gleaming with a predatory smile.

I want to back away, but there’s nowhere to go. The armchair presses against my back, trapping me between the plush cushion and the man standing before me. My heart races, every instinct in me telling me to run, but I can’t even get to my feet.

I’m frozen.

“Y-you’re not supposed to be here,” I say, my voice shaking despite my best efforts to keep it steady. “This is Kir’s house.”

Mal’s eyes darken with amusement. “I hardly think *the rules,* and where I am and am not *supposed to be,* are any of your concern right now…Freya.”

A cold shiver chases down my spine when he growls my name. I swallow hard, forcing myself to meet his gaze. I don’t want him to see the fear in my eyes, don’t want him to know how much he’s rattling me. But it’s impossible to hide.

He sees everything.

The desperate need to get out of this room and out of his orbit is almost overwhelming. I try to think how I could spring to my feet and maybe bolt past him. But before I can even finish that plan in my head, he’s closing the distance between us, as if sensing my pathetic intentions.

I cower back as his powerful hands grip either side of the high back of the chair behind me, his massive, muscled frame looming over me as he cages me in. The dim light from outside my bedroom window sends sharp shadows across his lethal jaw, Nordic cheekbones, and the rippling muscles of his forearms as his hands grip the chair like iron.

My pulse skips. Something somewhere between abject fear and liquid fire ripples through my system, electrifying me as I look up into those lethal blue eyes.

A dark, malevolent smile pulls at the corners of his mouth. Slowly, one of his hands uncoils from the back of the chair and drops to my chin. He cups my jaw, dragging one thick, strong finger down my cheek. The hand slides to my neck, squeezing slightly and sending bolts of something wicked and forbidden exploding through my core.

Then his hand drops even lower, and his fingers find the edge of the towel. He tugs at the fabric, just enough to make me hold it tighter, my body reacting instinctively to the threat of exposure.

“Do you think you can lie to me?” he murmurs, his voice low, almost a growl.

I blink, confused. “What are you talking about?”

His eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, I forget to breathe. There’s something dark and knowing in his gaze that makes my blood turn to ice.

“You think you’re *so* good at hiding,” he says softly, but there’s a hard edge to his words. “Pretending to be someone else. But I know the truth, Freya. About your family.”

The color drains from my face, and I can see my fear reflected in his eyes as they glint maliciously.

He knows.

He. Fucking. *Knows*.

There’s a reason I’ve avoided Mal Ulstäd ever since Kenzo and the rest of the Mori family landed on Annika’s and my radar five years ago, and it’s not because I knew he wore creepy masks and liked to murder people with swords. It’s not because of his Yakuza connections, either.

It’s because Mal Ulstäd is a link to the darkness I ran from when I was fifteen.

How the fuck does he know?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I whisper.

Mal’s hand slides back up my towel, making me shudder as his strong fingers wrap around my throat almost sensually. His grip tightens slightly, his thumb drifting over the pulse point.

“*Lying again*,” he tsks, his lips curving into a dark smile. “You’re not very good at it, you know.”

My mind races, trying to figure out how to get out of this. How to keep him from digging any deeper.

“What do you want?”

His smile fades, his expression turning cold. “The truth.”

My pulse quickens, my throat tightening under his grip as fear curls in my stomach. “W-what truth?”

Mal leans down closer, his face barely a foot away. I can feel the heat radiating off him, the sheer presence of him overwhelming my senses.

He’s malevolence and violence incarnate.

Rage personified.

And I’m trapped with nowhere to hide.

I flinch as he brings his face right to mine. For one shocked second, I’m sure he’s either going to kiss me or fucking *bite me*. But instead, I just feel his breath against my neck.

“The truth about *who you are*,” he rasps, his words warm against my ear. “The truth about your fucking family, *Freya*.”

“W-what do you want with Kir—”

I gasp as he snarls right into my ear.

“*Not* the fucking Nikolayevs,” he hisses viciously. “You’re as bad at playing stupid as you are at lying, so stop it.”

His fingers tighten around my neck.

“I’m talking about your real family, *Freya Lindqvist*.”

The name slams into me like a freight train, knocking the air out of my lungs. My body goes numb, every nerve ending alight as alarm bells jangle inside my head.

He knows.

He knows about everything I’ve been running from for years.

I remember the wall of “conquests” in my father’s office, trophies from his vanquished enemies. The steering wheel from the vintage Rolls Royce belonging to a Norwegian government minister who’d gone to war with William Lindqvist and paid with his and his family’s lives. The badge belonging to a former local chief of police who’d also run afoul of my father.

The jeweled crucifix that belonged to Erik Johannsen, after the once notorious Johannsen mafia family lost a territory war, and their lives, to him.

But there was one trophy from that wall in particular I could never forget: the brutally charred, bullethole-ridden, family crest hewn from stone that had once sat proudly over the front door of the home of another family that had fallen to my father.

A crest that read *Ulstäd*.

That trophy used to haunt me more than the others, because of the sheer physical violence still evident on it. The other trophies were possessions that had been taken after death. But that stone crest looked like it’d been pried from an enemy’s bleeding hands even before victory was certain.

And *that* is why I’ve avoided Mal. Because I know the history with his last name, and used to have nightmares about it after visiting my father’s office.

Because I know at some point in the past, my family destroyed Mal’s.

And now *he fucking knows, too.*

I don’t know how. I’ve been so careful, so meticulous. I’ve spent *years* covering my tracks, erasing every connection to the Lindqvist family and to

my past, building an entirely new life and identity.

"*How*..." My voice cracks, barely audible. "*How do you know that?*"

Mal crouches down in front of me, his hand still wrapped around my throat, pinning me in place. His eyes bore into mine, intense and unyielding.

"Because *none* of your fucking secrets are safe from me, Freya."

I shake my head, my thoughts ricocheting in a million different directions.

This can't be real. No one knows who I really am. Not even Annika and Damian.

"What do you want from me?" I ask, my voice trembling.

Mal leans in close again, his lips brushing against my ear. "I want you to know that you *belong to me now*."

The words send a shiver down my spine, a mix of fear and something darker that I don't want to admit. I try to pull away, but his grip tightens, his fingers around my throat like iron, cutting off my air.

"I—I don't belong to anyone," I whisper hoarsely through his grip. Even as I say the words, they ring false.

Mal smiles demonically, his eyes glittering with amusement. "*Incorrect*, Freya."

Before I can respond, he reaches out with his other hand, his fingers brushing lightly against the edge of the towel.

He's too close. Too powerful.

Too dangerous.

"*Stop*," I whisper, though there's no force behind the word. It's more of a plea than a command.

Mal's fingers tug gently at the towel again, threatening to pull it away. "I'll stop when you stop lying."

I swallow hard. "I'm not lying."

“Really.” His voice is low, smooth as silk. “I think you’ve been lying to *everyone*. About who you are. Where you come from. And most of all...” He leans in, his lips brushing against my cheek. “*About the evil that flows in your fucking veins*.”

My heart skips a beat, his fingers squeezing my windpipe tighter and tighter until I can barely breathe.

I want to deny it. I want to tell him he’s wrong.

But he’s right.

And in this moment, I hate him for it.

“You don’t know anything about me,” I choke, trying to pull away.

Mal just laughs softly, low and dangerous. “I know *everything* about you, Freya.”

Suddenly, he’s letting go of my throat. I choke, drawing in a ragged, rasping inhalation as he slowly stands up in front of me. He rolls his shoulders, taking a long, slow breath like nothing happened.

The sudden absence of his touch leaves me reeling, my body still humming with the tension he left behind.

“But your real problem isn’t what *I* know,” Mal says quietly, his eyes stabbing into me. “It’s what Kir and the rest of your little found family *doesn’t* know, isn’t it?”

The floor drops out from underneath me.

No.

No. Please, God, no…

He’s right. The worst part isn’t that Mal knows my dark secret. It’s that Kir, Damian, and Annika *don’t*, despite all these years of calling me family.

Because there’s another nightmarish trophy from my father’s wall I could never, ever purge from my memory.

Two wedding rings, hanging on a bloodied chain.

Two rings, each with a name engraved on it. I always thought of it as unbelievably horrifying that my father had killed a married couple and taken their *wedding rings* as his trophy. But it wasn't until years later, after I'd fallen in with Damian and Kir, that I finally pieced together the full story.

The names engraved on the rings were Daniil Kovalchuk…

…and Polina *Nikolayev.*

AKA, Kir's sister and her husband.

Damian's *parents*.

The two men who have become my family, who took me in and gave me an entirely new life?

My family killed theirs.

And Mal fucking *knows it*.

Before I can say anything, he turns and walks back toward the door, his voice floating over his shoulder like a dark promise.

"I'll be seeing you soon, Freya."

Then he's gone, leaving me alone in the silence, my heart racing, pure toxic terror flooding my veins.

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8

MAL

THE OCEAN IS the only place I can really think.

It's the only place where the screaming in my head quiets, where the constant pull of rage and the hunger for vengeance and violence fades into something manageable.

Holding the board, I dive through the waves, paddling further out, the icy water slicing over my bare skin like a blade. It's definitely wetsuit season now, especially in the northeastern US. I don't care.

The cold burns, numbing everything but the steady, rhythmic pull of the tide. My muscles strain as I paddle the surfboard out to wait for a bigger wave. But there's a peace in the struggle, a calm that only comes when I'm pushing my body to its limits.

Finally satisfied that I'm in the right spot I angle back toward the shore, waiting and bobbing in the inky black Long Island surf. For a few blessed moments, it's just me and the ocean.

No past. No future. Just the dark, swirling abyss below and the endless stretch of water ahead.

I turn and scan the horizon. The moon is a mere sliver in the sky, casting pale light over the churning waves. There's no one out here. There never is. That's why I come at night—the world is quiet, and the beach is deserted, and I can lose myself in the raw, untamed fury of the ocean.

But even out here in the cold embrace of the water, I can’t stop thinking about her.

Freya.

Her name is embedded in my mind, a dark whispered curse that refuses to leave. I close my eyes, bobbing in the waves, trying to send the thoughts down to the bottom of the sea. But they always resurface, emerging stronger, more insistent.

I should have killed her that night in the office. I should have ended it before she became a problem—before she started burrowing into my flesh like a splinter I can’t remove.

Before I knew *who she fucking was*.

But I didn’t. And now she’s stuck in my head like a cancer I can’t cut out.

I should be furious with myself for allowing her to occupy so much of my mind. But instead all I feel is that same dark pull, that sick attraction that makes my blood run hot.

She’s…different. I saw it in her eyes back at that office the night I caught her—and then again tonight. Fear, yes, but also something else. Something dark. Something that matches the shadows inside me.

And now I know why.

Freya Holm doesn’t exist. She’s a mask she’s been wearing for years, hiding from the world and herself. But I see her for who she really is.

Freya Lindqvist.

The surname alone stirs something dark and vicious inside me.

Lindqvist.

The family that destroyed mine. The jackals that came in the night and killed everything I’d ever loved.

My mother. My sister. My uncle—all of them dead because of that family.

And now, here she is, the last of them. The daughter of the man who brought it all crashing down.

I feel the surge in the water behind me. I allow my mind to go blank, feeling only me, the board, and the wave as it hits me. The force of it slams me forward, pumping adrenaline through my system as I catch the break and spring to my feet.

The cold autumn air whips at my wet skin. But the pain is good. It grounds me, keeps me tethered to something real. The wave roars under me, slamming me back toward shore as I angle the board and make the force of nature beneath me *mine* as I ride it to its inevitable end.

When I reach the beach, I pull myself and the surfboard onto the sand, collapsing on my back and letting the waves lap at my feet. My chest heaves as I stare up at the sky. The stars are hidden behind a layer of clouds, the moon barely visible. The world itself feels heavy, oppressive, like it's closing in on me.

But even here in the dark, amid the solitude of the ocean, I can't escape her.

Freya. Fucking. Lindqvist.

Logic would tell me to walk the fuck away from this. To let the ghosts of the past lie, and to acknowledge that Freya was still a child when her family destroyed mine.

That said?

I don't give a fuck.

I don't care if she's a fucking canonized saint, or curing cancer.

She's a *Lindqvist*.

I sit up, the sand clinging to my skin as I stare out at the endless stretch of water. The sound of the waves crashing against the shore is soothing, but it doesn't quiet the storm inside me.

The thing is, it's not just violent vengeance I crave when I look at her.

There are…*other urges* that come bubbling to the surface that I've swallowed back over the years alongside my rage.

Desires I keep bottled up, because I don't trust myself to set them free.

I *can't*. That's not who I am anymore. I'm a weapon. A tool. Here to do a job, and nothing more.

But Freya...

I can't help but wonder if the venomous, black thoughts that come swirling through my head at the very thought of her are because of who she *is*, or because of what I *want*.

Do I want to break her because she's a Lindqvist, and I've spent my entire life haunted by what her family did to mine? Or is it something else—something darker and more twisted?

I stand, brushing the sand from my skin as I grab my board. The cold wind whips against my face, but I barely feel it. I can only focus on the gnawing feeling in my gut that everything is spiraling out of control and I'm too far gone to stop it.

My phone is buzzing on the front seat of my truck when I get back to it. I lean the board against the tailgate before glancing at the screen.

Hana.

I almost ignore it, but something makes me answer.

"What?" I mutter.

There's a brief pause on the other end, and I can hear the faint sound of jazz in the background. She's at her usual spot.

"I figured you'd be out there," she says, her voice soft and teasing.

"Out where?" I grunt.

"I can *hear* the waves, dummy. Plus I know surfing at night is your go-to when you're brooding."

I snort as I glance back at the ocean. "I'm not brooding."

“Sure,” Hana replies, her tone dry.

There’s another pause, and her tone shifts.

“For real, though. Are you okay?”

It’s a simple question, but it grates on me. I’m not okay. I haven’t been okay since I was nine years old and my family got torn apart. And I certainly wasn’t okay during the two years after that, before I came to live with Kenzo, Tak, and Hana.

But that’s not something I’m ever going to talk about, not even with them.

Some things are too broken to fix.

“I’m fine,” I lie, my voice sharp. Too sharp.

Hana doesn’t push. She never does. But I can hear the concern in her voice. “Whatever it is, you know you don’t have to do it alone, right?”

A smile touches my lips. Hana is one in a million, and I know I’m beyond lucky to call her family. But just the same, alone is what I do best. Alone is where I’m safe. Where no one else can get hurt because of me.

“So how’s the jazz tonight?”

She snorts. “Changing the subject?”

“Obviously.”

She laughs lightly, and I can practically see her rolling her eyes. “You’re impossible, you know that?”

I don’t respond.

“The band is good tonight. I do miss the Monkey, though.”

She means The Golden Monkey, her favorite jazz spot back in Kyoto.

“Tell you what. Help me lean on Kenzo to get us the fuck out of this godforsaken city, and I’ll buy your drinks for a month at the Monkey.”

She laughs lightly. “Deal.” She exhales. “Seriously... Take care of yourself, Mal. You’ve got people who care about you.”

Before I can say anything else, she hangs up, the weight of her words settling heavy in my chest.

I toss the surfboard into the back, slam the gate shut and lean against the side of the truck. I close my eyes, letting the sound of the waves fill the silence. But the memories are already there, clawing their way to the surface.

The night my family died.

I can still see it. The flames licking the edges of the house, the sound of gunfire shattering the air, muffled through the ten feet of water above my head.

The metallic taste of the garden hose. The smoke in the air I breathed through it, hiding deep in the pool with the hose shoved in my mouth, listening as everything I loved was torn apart.

The blood everywhere when everything went quiet and I finally came up.

And then there was Kir.

I hadn't known who he was back then. I was too young, too scared. But years later, I realized it was him I saw when I clawed my way out of the pool that night, watching the flames destroy my world.

I force the memories back down, locking them away where they belong.

Kir is *one* key to all of this.

Freya is another.

I'm going to figure out how it all connects.

I have to.

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9

FREYA

LITTLE PLUM, my all-time favorite ramen spot, buzzes softly around me.

Legit, this place is *amazing*.

Now, granted, I've never actually been to Japan, which I'm guessing would alter Little Plum's spot at the top of my favorite ramen joints. But for now, this place is the *shit*.

Plus, they run it more like a café than a restaurant, meaning they don't just *tolerate* laptops, but actually encourage you to sit and hang for as long as you like.

I've been coming here ever since discovering it when Annika and I first got to New York. Usually it's a Zen place for me, but tonight, it does little to ease the storm that's been building inside me all day.

I sit at a small table, slurping down my *chashu* ramen while running some security checks on Kir's home network. Since he runs a ton of his business through it—both legal and *illegal*—part of my job is making sure the thing is utterly secure. So I'm *trying* to focus on that, but I'm not really succeeding.

Because of *him*.

Fucking *Mal*.

The Crown Prince of Malevolence. Maliciousness incarnate.

Everything about him messes with my head—his presence, the way he looks at me, the darkness that constantly swirls around him. I should be able to shut it out. Shut *him* out.

But I can't.

No matter how hard I try to focus on the screen in front of me, he's there, lingering in the back of my mind, a shadow I can't escape.

I sigh, rubbing a hand over my tired eyes, forcing myself to concentrate. I need to get this *done*. Kir's been waiting on the security updates for days now, and I can't afford to fall behind. But my mind won't settle. Won't let me forget the way Mal looked at me. The words he growled at me.

I shake my head, trying to shake the thoughts with it. I take another slurp of ridiculously tasty pork ramen, but it's no use. I'm restless, my thoughts spinning in a hundred different directions, not one of them related to the task at hand.

"Excuse me?"

A soft voice pulls me from my spiraling thoughts. I blink, looking up to see an Asian girl sitting at the table next to mine. Her dark hair is swept up in a messy ponytail, and she's dressed…well…like me.

Black skinny jeans, a black hoodie, and jewelry on her wrists and fingers that would fit in just fine at a fetish club. She winces behind her dark, thick-rimmed glasses as she looks at me with a pleading look.

"I hate to ask, but do you mind if I borrow your phone charger for a few minutes? I forgot mine at the hotel like an idiot."

Her voice is heavily accented, but her English is flawless.

I blink again, shifting my mind from Mal to the present and finding my social footing.

"Oh—yeah, of course," I say, rummaging in my bag and pulling out my charger. "Here. Take it for as long as you need, I'll be here a while."

The girl smiles, relief washing over her features. "Thanks so much. You *saved* me."

I give her a small smile in return. “No prob.”

As she plugs the charger into her laptop, I happen to glance at her screen. Honestly, I’m a nosy shit and I look at people’s screens in public all the fucking time. But when I glance at hers, my attention is instantly snagged by something familiar. The girl’s doing encryption work.

Ugh, I can’t help myself when I spot another security nerd.

“Sorry, is that a twofish-based GPD encryption algorithm?”

Her face lights up as her head whips back to me. “Yeah!” Then her brows knit behind her glasses. “Wow, good spot! Are you…?”

I nod, feeling an odd sense of kinship settle over me. “Yeah. I do security work mostly; building networks, some code modeling training.”

Her eyebrows raise in interest. “That’s awesome!”

I smile a little, feeling the edges of my earlier tension start to ease. “You?”

“Freelancer,” she says, shrugging lightly. “Mostly ethical hacking, helping companies stress-test their systems. I like it, keeps me on my toes.”

“Nice,” I say, nodding.

“All above-board stuff, of course,” she adds hastily.

“Totally. Same.”

She smirks, biting her lip as she glances over at me. “I mean, not *always* above-board…”

My smile widens. “*Same*.”

She laughs, extending a hand. “Cain.” She rolls her eyes. “Sorry, it’s dumb, I know. But I don’t share my real name with people until I’ve known them a while. That’s my online handle.”

I smile, shaking my head. “No, I totally get it.” I take her hand and shake it. “I’m Freya. Real name. Nice to meet you, Cain.”

She grins. “Awesome to meet you, real-name-Freya. It’s so rare to run into someone who understands all of this. People usually give me weird looks when I try to explain what I do.”

I laugh, feeling the connection growing between us. “Yes! They think it’s all like the movies—some guy in a hoodie typing furiously on a laptop.”

We pause when we realize we’re *both* actually wearing hoodies, and have just *absolutely* been furiously typing on our laptops. The two of us crack up, screeching with laughter as the rest of the place looks at us like we’re nuts.

“Are you from New York?”

I shake my head. “I’m from all over. But I’m here now. You?”

“Japan,” she shrugs. “I know, the Italian accent threw you off.”

I snort. The accent is *completely* East Asian.

This girl is funny. I like her.

“Do you come here a lot? This is my first time here. I’m staying at a hotel close by and I needed a change of scenery.”

I nod. “Yeah, I love this place. Though I’m guessing the ramen is *way* better in Japan.”

She makes a face. “Eh, there’s shitty food in every country.”

I grin. “Well, it’s definitely a good place to come when you need a change of scenery. That’s why I’m here tonight. Things have been…”

I trail off, frowning.

“Sorry, too much information,” I say.

“No problem,” she smiles, laughing a little. “I get it. Sometimes, you just need to get out of your head for a while.”

“*Exactly*,” I agree, glad she doesn’t pry.

We settle into an easy conversation after that, touching on everything from our favorite coding languages to the best laptop-friendly coffee shops in

New York. It feels good to talk about something other than the mess I've found myself in lately. For a while, at least, I can pretend everything is normal.

But even as we talk, I can't completely shake the feeling that there's something lurking beneath the surface, waiting to pull me under.

A couple of hours later, after Cain and I have exchanged phone numbers and emails and said our goodbyes, I find myself walking aimlessly. The city hums around me, but the cool evening air does little to soothe the unease that's crept back into my chest.

Meeting Cain was unexpected. But good. It's rare to meet someone who shares the same world I do. Still, even as I replay our conversation in my mind, a part of me is restless. No matter how much I try to distract myself, my thoughts keep circling back to Mal.

Clearly, I can't escape him. Nor can I escape the feeling that I'm being pulled into a storm that I can't control.

But maybe…

Maybe I don't want to.

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10

FREYA

HIS HANDS ROAM over my body, leaving marks all over me as I writhe under his touch.

I can feel the heat of him, the weight of his body pressing me into the mattress as his fingers trail over my skin, rough and possessive. His breath is hot on my neck, and the sharp bite of his teeth into my tender flesh has me moaning eagerly as my back arches against him.

Instantly he's flipping me over, grabbing a fistful of my hair and pinning me down. His other hand grabs the back of my panties, yanking them down before his fingers thrust roughly between my legs, feeling my traitorous wetness.

The masculine leather and sandalwood scent of him fills the air. Surrounding me. Suffocating me. My pulse quickens, my breath coming in shallow gasps as I arch into him, craving more, needing more.

He growls low in his throat, the sound vibrating through my body, sending a shiver down my spine. His lips brush against my ear, soft at first, then more insistently, teeth grazing my skin in a way that should terrify me but doesn't. Instead it ignites something deep inside, something I've been trying to bury for so long.

"Say it," Mal whispers, his voice thick. "Say you belong to me."

I gasp, my body trembling beneath him, my core clenching around his thick fingers as he mercilessly pounds them into me from behind. His palm slaps

my ass hard, making me squeal into the sheets as they twist between my teeth.

My mind is caught between fear that's been gnawing at me since the first moment I saw him and dark, shameful desire I can't seem to shake. My lips part, the words hovering there, waiting to be spoken.

I belong to you.

I open my mouth but the words don't come. Instead, I reach back for him, my fingers curling around his wrist, trying to pull him closer and deeper, to feel more of him. His grip tightens in my hair, his hand spanking my ass before those fingers ram back into me, knocking the air from my lungs.

He's everywhere—his hands, his breath, his body pressing into me like he's claiming every part of me.

I should push him away. But I don't.

I can't.

My body is betraying me, moving with his, craving his touch, needing his control. There's a darkness in me that matches the one in him, and no matter how I try to deny it, I want this. I want *him*.

I feel his lips against mine, fierce and demanding, and I let myself fall into the kiss, into the heat of him, into the way he makes everything else disappear. Nothing else exists when he's near. It's just him and me and the magnetic, dangerous pull between us that I can't fight anymore.

"*I fucking own you*," Mal growls, his voice commanding. "*Never forget that*."

I shouldn't want this. I shouldn't *need* this. But it's too late. I'm already lost, already his.

And yet something isn't right.

The room is too still, too quiet. There's a strange haze around the edges of my vision, and for a moment its feels like I'm sinking. I try to focus, to ground myself, but everything is slipping away.

Mal’s grip loosens. His presence fades.

And just like that, I’m alone.

I jerk awake, my heart pounding as I sit up in bed, gasping for breath. My hand flies to my chest, my fingers digging into the fabric of my shirt, as if the pressure can somehow calm the erratic beat of my heart. The sheets are twisted around my legs, damp with sweat and…*other* things.

The room is silent.

It was a dream.

Just a dream.

I press the heels of my hands against my eyes, trying to shake off the lingering sensation of Mal’s touch. It felt so real. The way his voice echoed in my ears, dark and commanding and possessive, like he was right here in the room with me.

I glance around, my breath still coming in shallow bursts. The soft glow of the city lights filters through the curtains, casting long shadows across the floor. Everything is quiet. Calm. But the knot of fear in my stomach refuses to go away.

I collapse back against the pillows, my body trembling as the wave of adrenaline slowly recedes, leaving only exhaustion in its wake. I can still feel the ghost of Mal’s touch on my skin, the pressure of his hands, his lips.

It felt *so real*.

I close my eyes, willing myself to calm down, but my mind won’t stop racing. The dream was perhaps a warning, a reminder of just how dangerous he is and how easily he could consume me.

You want him to.

I shudder as the thought slithers through my psyche. It’s beyond fucked up, but the thought that won’t leave, no matter how much I try to will it away.

Mal is a dangerous monster. That much is abundantly obvious. I’ve watched him casually spill blood, maim and kill, all without flinching or showing

one iota of emotion.

Plus, he knows the darkest, most dangerous secret I have.

…And yet here I am, having very, *very* vivid sex dreams about him.

This one is hardly the first since the night he came into my room. And each time they come, they get more and more deviant and fucked up. More *wrong*. Like my secretive, twisted desires and kinks are feeling more and more comfortable coming up to the surface to dance with dream Mal.

I'm having mind-blowing, kink-tastic, *filthy* dream sex with the single most dangerous person to my health and well-being.

What is wrong with me?

I've been asking myself that question ever since the night I first saw him standing over those bodies with blood on his hands and a cold, calculating look in his eyes, but there's no answer.

I should be terrified of him. I *am* terrified of him.

But I'm also drawn to him in a way that scares me even more.

I sit up again, shoving the sweat-soaked sheets aside as I swing my legs over the edge of the bed. I shiver when the cool air hits my skin, though I'm not sure if it's from the cold or the lingering effects of the dream.

I need to get out of here.

But I *can't*.

It's barely noon, which is like two in the morning for me. Annika and I have been moved to Kir's penthouse in the city, still in lockdown after the rooftop shooting at the engagement party.

I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep again anytime soon. So I stand, grabbing the robe that's draped over the chair in the corner of the room. The fabric is soft and luxurious but too heavy right now, like it's suffocating me. I shrug it on anyway, belting it tight as I make my way to the window.

One of the modifications Kir made to this place to turn it into Annika's and my personal Fort Knox was to have the windows coated in a UV-blocking

film. So even through it’s light out, I can still press my forehead against the glass and look out over the city.

I swear, I don’t deserve this found family.

I close my eyes as I try to steady my breathing and push the dream from my mind. But the image of Mal, the feel of his hands, the sound of his voice—it’s all still there, lurking just beneath the surface.

I can’t escape him.

And the real problem is, I don’t even know if I *want to*.

A soft knock at the door startles me and I turn, my heart leaping into my throat. I half expect to see Mal standing in the doorway, just like he was in the dream.

But he’s not.

It’s Annika.

Her red hair is loose around her shoulders, and she’s wearing an oversized Rangers hoodie that I recognize as Damian’s.

This penthouse is a frequent crash spot for him—when he’s not in a medically induced coma fighting for his life, that is.

I smile wryly at the way the hoodie hangs off Annika like a blanket, or a hilarious poncho. She looks tired, her face drawn, her eyes heavy with exhaustion.

“Couldn’t sleep?” she asks softly.

I shake my head, pulling the robe tighter around me. “Not really.”

Annika steps into the room, closing the door quietly behind her. She moves toward the bed, sitting on the edge of it with a sigh. “I keep thinking about the other night. The shooting, all of it.”

“Hey, we’ve dealt with worse when it was just us against the world on the streets, right?”

She smirks, lifting her face to eye me. “Is this the start of another trademark Freya pep talk?”

“The grass is, uh…always greener?”

She snickers.

“You don’t know what you’ve got ’til it’s gone?”

She giggles, eyeing me again. “Thank you.”

“Any time,” I grin back. “Hey, if I can’t help with actual advice, I can at least make you laugh enough to forget what’s bothering you, right?”

She smiles wryly at me, but her face is still worried.

And I know why.

I wish she felt she could talk to me about it.

In hindsight, it’s amazing that Anni and I even *survived* those years on the streets. We were two young girls, alone, and the world is full of monsters who like to prey on those. I know Annika had her own brushes with horror and danger, same as me.

And then we met a different kind of monster. One with patience and nice words. One with presents and shiny trinkets to lure us deeper.

His name was Valon Leka, head of The Brotherhood, an Armenian crime syndicate. Annika and I first crossed his path when he hired us to do a job. At the time, it had been our biggest heist yet, and after we did what we’d been tasked with doing, Valon let us keep *half* of what we’d stolen.

After that, he owned us.

The next job, again, he gave us half the take instead of the ten percent he’d promised us. The next one we basically kept everything. He heaped us with praise, gifts, cars, fancy clothes, jewelry…you name it.

I was taken in by his charm and his favors.

Annika got *consumed* by them.

Looking back, I realize that what my friend went through is called grooming now. Anni was twenty-two and literally homeless, with no family or safety net aside from me, who was *also* homeless and without family or safety net.

Valon, meanwhile, was forty-five, charming, rich, powerful, and fairly handsome.

Annika never stood a chance.

We were part of Valon's orbit for three years. I will never, *ever* lose the guilt I have for letting my best friend in the world remain in that prison for so long.

He didn't keep Annika locked in a cage or tied to a wall or anything, of course. Her prison was one made from glittery gifts and lavish vacations. Built on fancy apartments and luxury cars. He kept us both happy and distracted enough to use her for three fucking years, until one day, we thankfully woke up.

We left, and we never looked back. And that would have been the final page of that chapter. Except that a few months ago, we kinda fucked up.

Part of Kir bringing us into his world was that we now worked for *him*. He appreciated our talents for theft, but he had bigger, grander plans for those skills. Instead of ripping off rich assholes, skimming credit cards, and boosting cars, Anni and I started using our talents for bigger-picture stuff.

Rather than hacking into checking accounts, I was digging up dirt to use against Kir's enemies. Annika pivoted from social engineering her way into situations to crushing people in the boardroom. She's now the bad-ass bitch who walks into a meeting with serious big dick energy and makes sure Kir gets what he came for.

Honestly, it's *way* more fun than stealing credit cards.

But a few months ago, the old itch needed scratching. We talked to The Broker—a neutral, anonymous party who connects people like us to jobs that *need* people like us—and found ourselves talking to a particularly nasty motherfucker named Ulkan Gacaferi.

On the surface, Ulkan's job was a breeze. All we had to do was steal a brand-new, neon yellow Lamborghini from the parking garage of an ultra-exclusive condo in midtown. He told us he was playing a practical joke on a friend of his. And he was willing to pay *a shitload* for it: three hundred and fifty grand for the car itself, plus another hundred grand for our talents.

Needless to say, we took the job. I think we even told each other that we'd spend a bunch of the money on something nice for Kir.

Then things went bad.

We stole the car no problem, and were driving it to the drop-off point when we took a sharp turn and heard something heavy fall over in the trunk. And, like morons, we went to have a look.

Like I said, we fucked up.

Inside the trunk we found close to a hundred and fifty pounds of cocaine, something like two million in cash, and a couple of not-very-legal-looking machine guns.

They weren't just *anyone's* drugs, cash, and guns, either.

…They belonged to *Valon*.

Yeah. Insert sad trombone sound effect here.

We ditched the car by the Lincoln Tunnel, wiped it for prints, and *walked the fuck away*. And now we've got *two* devils after us, and neither one is happy. Ulkan is pissed because we bailed on the job. And Valon is pissed because…well, because of the obvious.

He knows it was us. I mean I'm not *positive*, but I'm also not stupid. Annika hasn't said a word to me, but I know what I saw at her engagement party. Valon was there, and she was talking to him with a pale, stricken face.

Part of me is angry that she hasn't told me about it, but the other part of me totally understands. She might want to shove it out of her mind.

However, us avoiding the subject doesn't mean the threat—or *threats*—aren't out there.

Yeah, maybe—probably—the shooting the other night was one of Kir's enemies, or Sota's, or Kenzo's, or…whoever's.

But *maybe* it's one of the two very dangerous men who have a huge bone to pick with *us*.

"What the fuck are we going to do, Frey?" She makes a face. "What if the other night was Ulkan, or something?"

Something like Valon, Anni?

I hold off on putting that out there. She'll talk to me about her monster when she's ready.

"I think for now, we just wait and see, okay?" I say quietly, squeezing her hand. "I mean it's a total snooze-fest here, but you *know* we're safe."

There are like ten of Kir's guys guarding the lobby, the roof, patrolling the hallways, and standing guard outside the door. Even the fucking windows are bullet-proof.

"Let's just see what sort of rocks Kir and the Mori family kick over while they're out there checking this out, okay?"

She nods glumly.

"You should also try to get some more rest," I grin. "After all, you do have your *speeecccial daaaay* coming up."

Anni laughs and flips me off for my wedding crack. Then she hugs me.

"Why does it sometimes still feel like we're running?"

"You wanna try standing still for once?"

She blows out a breath as she stands. "Sounds amazing. Sign me the *fuck* up."

She walks back to the door and then glances at me over her shoulder. "Hey—speaking of sleep, you should get some too sometime."

"Yeah, probably."

“Wanna binge the Ocean’s Eleven movies later?”

I snort. “*Ob*viously.”

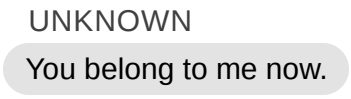
She flashes me a smile as she opens the door. “OK. Get some sleep, Frey.”

But sleep is the last thing on my mind. I make my way back to the window, my heart still racing as I remember the unsettling, deviant, dark dreams involving Mal.

I press my palms to the glass and gaze out at the city beneath me.

The dream felt *so real*. His touch, his voice—it feels real even now, in the cold light of day, locked safely away from the world.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, startling me. I grab it, glancing at the screen to see an incoming text from an unknown number.



Something cold rakes its claws down my back. At the same time, something horribly *warm* floods my core.

I should delete the text. I should block his number, flee the country, do *everything* to get away from him.

But I won’t.

Because deep down, I know the horrible truth.

He’s right.

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11

FREYA

I STIR IN MY SLEEP, my mind foggy, drifting somewhere between dreamland and consciousness. Mal's hands are on me—firm, rough, his fingers tracing over my body like it's his to claim.

His hot skin presses against mine, his body heavy and chiseled and solid. It's a sensation I've felt before, somewhere in the murky haze of my unconscious—a twisted blend of fear and desire, swirling together until I can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

I moan softly, my body instinctively arching into his touch.

I know this is a dream.

Yet again.

But even if the person my mind has chosen as the main character of this particular sex dream is a complete psychopath who may or may not have some of the most damning, dangerous leverage over me possible, that doesn't mean I can't enjoy it, right?

Right.

So I let myself sink into the black, swirling heat of his touch. I allow myself to let go, to moan and writhe as yet another of the dark, twisted dreams drags me under.

Maybe I'll wake up confused and ashamed again.

…Maybe it’s worth it.

I whimper when his hands forcefully cup my breasts, his fingers pinching, twisting, and tugging on my aching nipples through my cotton t-shirt, brutalizing them and bringing a cry of pleasure to my choked throat.

One hand pushes lower, slowly, deliberately, sliding down over my stomach. He cups my pussy through my sleep shorts and panties, and when I feel a thick finger drag dangerously up my slit, I shamelessly lift my hips to press my sex harder against him.

“*Such a greedy little whore,”* he murmurs quietly.

“*Fuck yes*,” I murmur back, my eyes squeezed shut as he rubs my clit through my panties.

I pout when the hand pulls away from between my legs, sliding back up my body and pinching a nipple before wrapping around my throat.

“*Choke me*,” I gasp, shivering darkly as his thumb drags back and forth over my pulse point.

He laughs, his tone black and grating as he starts to squeeze.

He doesn’t give me everything I want. The hand loosens again, sliding up to cup my jaw. I feel his thumb drag across my lips, as if my brain is replaying the sinful exchange from the darkened office that first night our paths crossed.

Slowly, back and forth, his thumb smears across my lower lip, as if getting me ready. A second later, I feel his thumb slide away, only to be replaced by two thick fingers.

I whimper when his other hand grabs a fistful of my hair at the back of my head, twisting my head sideways as the two fingers push between my lips and into my mouth.

“*Suck*,” he commands. “Suck like a good whore. Show me how you’re going to suck my cock later.”

I moan eagerly around his intruding fingers, sucking them greedily like a porn star. My cheeks hollow, my lips sealed tight around them, and my

tongue wantonly swirls around them as they thrust into my mouth.

“Such a good little cocksucker,” he growls darkly.

Fuck.

It should enrage me to be called that. But the filthy words mixed with the golden praise is like a drug to me. It eggs me on, making me moan louder as I greedily slurp on his fingers, the sound echoing in my ears.

Wait.

Something feels different this time.

The touch is too real, too solid. I can *feel* the weight of him sitting next to me, his breath hot on my neck.

Taste his fingers in my mouth.

Oh holy fuck…

My eyes snap open, shattering the fog of sleep in an instant.

I’m not dreaming.

A wave of terror crashes over me as reality explodes into the forefront of my brain. Mal is *here*—actually, literally, *right fucking here*—sitting on the edge of my bed, the fingers of one hand between my lips. His other hand is tangled in my hair, pinning me in place.

My wide, horrified eyes dart to the side, instantly locking with his icy, crystal blue ones.

Holy fucking shit.

My body jerks and spasms as I try to jump out of bed.

But I can’t.

Mal barely looks like he’s registered that I’m trying to get away from him. But his hand tightens painfully in my hair, sending lightning bolts exploding through my scalp as he keeps me pinned to the sheets. His

fingers push deeper into my mouth in a lazy, deliberate motion, stroking in and out.

In and out.

It's not just his hands pinning me to the bed. It's those eerie blue eyes and the wild fierceness behind them, turning me to stone. My eyes lock with his, my pulse roaring in my ears as his fingers keep sensually fucking my mouth.

"Good morning, Freya," he murmurs, his voice low, dangerous, and perfectly calm as he leans over me.

There's a twisted amusement in his tone, like he's enjoying every second of my confusion, relishing every ounce of power he has over me.

I tremble beneath him, my breath shaky and uneven around his fingers. I try again to pull away, but it's useless. He tightens his grip on my hair, leaning over me, leaving no room for escape.

"You've been ignoring me," Mal growls, his voice a dark rasp, thick with anger. "I don't *like* being ignored."

My pulse races, my mind scrambling to make sense of what's happening. But there's no room for rational thought. I'm trapped by an *actual fucking psychopath*.

And he's *enjoying* it.

"Trying to tell yourself that you hate this?" Mal's voice is thick with mockery, his lips brushing against my ear. "That you want to push me away and say no to this?"

I can't form words. My throat has closed up. Every instinct is screaming at me to fight, to flee, but I'm paralyzed. And my body—God, my *body*—is betraying me. I can feel the pull, the twisted craving for his touch.

Mal's fingers slowly slide out of my mouth, leaving a trail of warmth along my cheek. His eyes are locked on mine, a terrifying, dark hunger in them that makes my stomach twist.

“That’s just the world’s expectations talking,” he murmurs, his voice a low, hypnotic whisper. “The lies you tell yourself because you so desperately want to be *normal*.”

His hand shifts, cupping my chin, forcing my gaze to stay riveted to his. His eyes burn into mine with an intensity that makes me want to disappear, to collapse under the weight of his attention as he strokes his thumb across my swollen bottom lip.

“But you and I both know the truth, don’t we, Freya?” His voice drops to a soft growl, so low it sends a shiver down my spine. “You’re *not* normal. And neither. Am. I.”

The words hit like a blow, sharp and unforgiving. Deep down, I know he’s right. He sees something in me, something I’ve been hiding for so long I barely remember it’s there. Something dark. Something twisted.

“Don’t put on that mask for me,” he continues, his voice firm, commanding. “That fake good-girl bullshit. I see right fucking through it. I see *you*.”

His fingers find my lips again, slipping between them, reminding me that he’s in control and there’s no escape. My body tenses up, every muscle tight, and before I can stop myself, I bite down.

Hard.

I taste the metallic tang of copper, and feel his skin break beneath my teeth.

Mal doesn’t flinch.

At. All.

His lips just curl into a dark, twisted smile, his eyes gleaming with amusement. “If you think that’s going to do anything but turn me on even more, you’re mistaken.”

A wave of fear crashes over me, stronger this time. He *likes* this. My fear, my futile resistance, my powerlessness. No matter what I do, or how hard I fight back, he’s still in control.

“*But*,” he adds, his voice dropping lower, softer, “I’m not in the mood for blood today.”

I tremble under his gaze, my breath coming in shallow gasps.

“You see, I know what you want, Freya,” he murmurs, his fingers trailing down my body, teasing, testing. “I know what you crave. You’re not as good at hiding it as you think.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out his words. Then I feel his fingers drag down the soft slope of my breast through my t-shirt. I bite down hard on my lip to stop the whimper when he pinches my throbbing, aching nipple, giving it a cruel twist that sends electricity throbbing through my core before he lets his hand wander lower.

My body trembles, my mind spinning in a vortex of shame and desire.

“You want control,” Mal whispers, his hand sliding even lower, pushing me closer to the edge. “But you also want to *lose it*. Completely. With *me*. So be a good girl…”

His hand suddenly moves away from where it’s been lingering by my stomach and slides across the sheets to my hand. His fingers tangle with mine, gripping them firmly and bringing them back to rest against my stomach again, still laced with his.

Confusion furrows my brow, stilling my racing pulse for a moment.

…Until he starts to push my hand—*our hands*—lower.

I tremble and shake as he guides my fingers over my ribs, my stomach. He uses his thumb to lift the waist of my shorts and the lace of my thong before he pulls my hand with his underneath them both.

Something explosive pulses inside of me, so intense I feel like I might pass out. My fingers and his glide over my skin, over the soft mound of my sex, until suddenly, with a stifled gasp, I feel both our fingers pushing wetly down through the soft, silky lips of my pussy.

“Feel what a fucking *mess* you’ve made,” he growls, his fingers curling mine against my pussy and bringing a sharp gasping cry to my lips. “Soaking your panties like a dirty little *whore*. Now, let’s see just how fucking greedy this little cunt is…”

There’s no preamble. No easing into things. In one motion, he pushes my index finger and his to my opening and rams them *deep* inside.

The thing is, he doesn’t *need* to ease into things. I’m so fucking soaked that both of our fingers sink easily, if snugly, inside.

Fucking *deep* inside.

I cry out, choking back a moan as my thighs instinctively clamp shut. But I instantly jolt, biting down sharply on my lip as Mal slaps my legs apart again. His hand curls both of our fingers with a stroking, coaxing motion, rubbing against my g-spot, making my eyes roll back in my head. He pulls my finger out, rubbing it over my clit alongside his before he rams them both back inside.

“You’ve got such a fucking tight little pussy, Freya,” he murmurs darkly. “I can just imagine the way it would squeeze the life out of my cock—if I could even fit it all inside you.”

I moan, shaking as he starts to finger me faster, and harder, sending me reeling as the room spins around me.

“I’ll *make it* fit, though, Freya,” he growls. “Even if I have to bury it down your throat first and get it nice and wet before I push it into this fucking *tight* little cunt.”

Tears burn in my eyes, my throat tight with shame and something dark that I don’t want to admit as he starts to pump our fingers in and out of my aching, needy pussy. He wipes the tears away with his thumb, his touch almost tender, as if he knows exactly how far to push and when to stop.

“I’ll show you how,” he breathes darkly. “I’ll teach you.”

His hands move with precision, guiding me. My body follows his lead without question, without hesitation. I’m helpless under his touch, unable to deny the pull of him, his dark, twisted magnetism that’s slowly breaking me down.

“Are you having trouble?” Mal’s voice is almost mocking, but there’s a sharp edge to it. “Let me help.”

His fingers move with brutal efficiency, pushing me closer, each touch sending waves of heat and shame crashing over me. I gasp, my body betraying me again, responding to him in ways I can't stop.

I don't want to stop them. Not anymore.

"That's it," he growls softly. "Let go. You're *mine*, Freya. Every fucking part of you, including this messy little pussy. It isn't even your pussy anymore," he snarls darkly. "It's *my* fucking pussy. And when I want it to come, it *will fucking come*, is that clear?"

All I can do is blubber and whimper something possibly resembling an answer in the affirmative as I nod my head. I can feel my mouth going slack, my back arching and writhing as my entire core, my entire being, crumbles under his touch and his words.

"So be a good little whore," he snarls right into my ear as our fingers curl deep inside of me. "And fucking *come for me*, right *the fuck now*."

My vision blurs as the pressure builds inside me, coiling tighter and tighter until I can't hold on anymore. And then, with one final, commanding touch, he pulls the trigger, shattering me completely.

Suddenly, I'm falling, tumbling into the abyss, my body exploding with sensation, my mind going blank as everything else fades away.

No fear. No shame. Just the raw, overwhelming release of everything he's built up inside me.

Then it's over.

I collapse back onto the bed, my body spent. My breath comes in ragged gasps, my heart pounding in my chest as I try to piece myself back together. I'm not sure how long I lie like that, my entire body tingling and quivering, my eyes squeezed shut as I try and comprehend what just happened.

Slowly I blink, my vision clearing as I open my eyes.

I stiffen.

Mal is gone.

And no, it wasn’t another excruciatingly vivid dream. The sheets are still warm from where he was sitting on the edge of my bed. My body can still feel where I’m stretched from our fingers inside me, and mine are still sticky and wet.

But he’s disappeared, leaving nothing behind but the weight of what just happened.

I pull the covers over my body, my hands trembling as I curl into a ball, my mind reeling. Shame floods over, acrid and bitter.

I let him take control. I *wanted* him to. Now I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop him from doing so again.

And the most fucked up part?

I’m not sure I *want to*.

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12

FREYA

THE SHRILL RING of my phone rips me from sleep. I groan, rolling over in bed, my mind foggy. Daylight bleeds in around the edges of the blackout shades, making me squint as I silence the phone.

My skin already prickles with discomfort just knowing the sun is out there, waiting for me. Always waiting.

Xeroderma pigmentosum. A mouthful of medical mumbo-jumbo that boils down to one cruel fact: the sun is my enemy. I can't repair the damage from UV light like most people can. The rays that most people soak up without a second thought tear me apart, cell by cell.

This is why I've learned to live in the shadows, to embrace the night. My day starts when other people's ends.

To most of the world, I know I must look like a creature of the night by choice. Like I'm leaning *way* too hard into the goth aesthetic. But no. A life lived in the shadows and the darkness was decided for me long ago, when my symptoms first started manifesting. I was four.

Apparently, my great-grandmother had the same condition, which comes with the bonus of making me *ten thousand* times more likely to develop non-melanoma skin cancer, and two thousand times more likely to get melanoma.

Like, *thanks*, genetics.

I reach for my phone, trying to blink away the haze of sleep, the weight of my past clinging to me like a second skin. I think about how I used to be normal once—or as close to normal as possible when your last name is Lindqvist.

When I was little, I had a nanny that would read me bedtime stories about princes and princesses, and fabled kingdoms, and sorcerers' curses.

I used to think that's what plagued my family: a curse. Maybe even several of them. I knew far earlier than I should what my father did for a living, and where the big mansion, the cars, the lavish trips, the pool, the help, the nannies, and all the luxury came from.

There's a reason I don't use the name "Lindqvist", and it's *not* because it weirds out people who are unused to anything but "U" following "Q".

My father was a terror: a ruthless, uncaring, mafia strongman. And if the way he ruled over his own family was any indication, I can only imagine how awful he was to the outside world.

You see, I never once thought of *us* as the fairytale kings and queens from the bedtime stories. No, I knew my father was the evil wizard in the black tower, who fought the "good guys".

And because of that—my father being the monster that he was—I knew young that we'd been cursed.

It was the only explanation for the cards we'd been dealt.

My issues with the sun. My mother dying so young. Learning that I too, like my brother Nils, had inherited further darkness from our father.

Huntington's disease attacks the neurons in the brain, causing them to slowly break down and die. Your arms and legs stop working correctly. So do your lungs. You lose the ability to think or live in any real capacity. It kills you, horribly and painfully, sometimes as early as forty.

There is no cure.

Yeah. My family is so terrible that I got *two* curses: the sun wants to kill me, and my body will finish the job anyway, probably in the next fifteen

years.

No one, not even Anni, knows.

My mother was the last tether our family had to anything resembling “good”. Dad ruled the house with the same iron fist he used to rule the Lindqvist criminal empire. Nils was the golden child, following in our dad’s footsteps: cold, cruel and merciless, just like him.

Me, I was the burden. The sick girl destined to die young, the one who would never be strong enough, fast enough, ruthless enough. After my mother passed, I don’t think I ever even felt like I was part of a family. More like an unwanted houseguest that was being “allowed”, begrudgingly, to overstay her welcome.

I was thirteen when the verbal abuse and the general disdain my brother and father held for me turned into something far darker. More evil.

More…physical.

At first it was waking up with my heart in my throat, my father silhouetted in the bedroom door, reeking of vodka, watching me.

He never came further than the doorway.

But Nils did.

There’s a reason I’m twenty-six and have never sought out physical intimacy with another person.

I mean I like the *idea* of sex. I *want* sex. But the hands that touched me even when I said no, and the threats of even worse if I told anyone, chased away any thoughts of actually exploring those desires with a partner, even now.

Eventually, when I was fifteen, it’s what drove me from my home. My brother’s “visits” were getting more frequent, and he was pushing things further. On top of that, I could see the dark road my father was driving his empire down. No longer satisfied with petty mafia shit like protection rackets, he was dipping a toe into the weapons trade, smuggling drugs, and bringing prostitution under the family business umbrella.

That’s when I ran and never looked back, disappearing before they could turn me into one of *them*, or break me in the process.

I thought I had escaped. Then my father proved how wrong I was.

Two years after I left, he murdered my brother before taking his own life, writing in the note he left behind it was to “save them both” from the horrors that Huntington’s would eventually wreak on them.

So even though the monsters are dead, they’re a constant reminder of the fate that awaits me, one that I’ll never escape.

The phone screams at me again. I groan as I grab it off the bed next to me, frowning at the unknown number on the screen.

Strange. I hacked my own phone years ago and put a perma-block on it, barring any number but those in my contacts from getting through.

So who the fuck is this?

I silence the ringer and let the call go to voicemail before I close my eyes again and turn to snuggle back into bed.

A text notification dings in the temporary silence, shattering it. Grumbling, I snatch the phone up, and instantly freeze at the text on my screen.

UNKNOWN

Perhaps it’s my fault for not laying out the specifics of this arrangement before.

My spine snaps to attention as any last vestige of sleep drops from me.

It’s Mal. It has to be.

UNKNOWN

Don’t blame yourself. I should have been clearer. I’ll correct that now.

UNKNOWN

When I fucking call, you answer. When I tell you to do something, you fucking DO IT, immediately. Do us both a favor. Don’t play stupid. I know, Freya. I know your every dark secret. Every sin.

UNKNOWN

And I know that Kir does NOT know that his favorite adopted goth princess comes from the family that murdered his sister.

My blood turns to ice as I stare at the screen, my throat slowly closing.

UNKNOWN

I fucking OWN YOU.

I'm shaking as I pick up the phone and type a quick reply.

ME

I understand. I was asleep when you called.

The phone is silent for a full minute. Eventually, I stop staring at it and drop it onto the covers, rolling onto my back in bed and looking up at the ceiling.

That's when it rings.

"How late you sleep in isn't really my concern."

I shiver as Mal's dark, slightly accented voice rumbles like velvet, gravel, and smoke through the phone.

"I wasn't…"

I bite my lip.

I wasn't sleeping "in", I was just *sleeping*, as per my normal schedule. But just as I'm about to say that, it occurs to me that telling this monster any of my habits is probably not a smart idea.

Because he'll use them against me. And I'm already at a serious disadvantage in whatever battle this is.

"I'm sorry I missed your call," I mutter quietly.

"I'm going to text you an address. Be at it in half an hour," Mal growls, his voice dark and smooth with an unmistakable commanding edge. Even over the phone, I can hear the demand beneath the surface, the implication that this isn't a request.

I close my eyes, irritation bubbling up from underneath the sleep still clouding my brain.

“No.”

There’s a brief pause, and when he speaks again, his voice is quieter. More dangerous. “*Excuse me*?”

“I said no. I can’t.” I push myself up in bed. “I can’t come to you right now.”

Like, literally. Actually. Physically.

“You can and you will,” Mal growls, the sharpness in his voice cutting through any leftover fog in my mind.

“No,” I repeat, this time more firmly. Yes, I could just tell him about my condition and how dangerous it is for me to be outside during the day. But I don’t want to give him that power over me, don’t want him to have another way to control me. Instead, I just say it again: “No.”

There’s a tense silence on the other end of the line, but then his voice returns, low and icy.

“You’re testing my patience.”

I tighten my grip on the phone, feeling my pulse quicken. Then, with a sharp exhale, I stab the end call button before he can say anything else.

The silence in the room is deafening, the echo of my defiance hanging in the air. My heart is still racing in my chest, adrenaline coursing through me in a strange, heady rush. Every survival instinct I have screams that hanging up on Mal won’t end well.

I don’t care.

Right now, all I want to do is crawl back into bed and sleep.

And after turning off my phone, that’s exactly what I do.

THE SUN HAS FINALLY SUNK behind the horizon by the time I crawl out of bed again.

The shadows are long and comforting, wrapping me in their dark embrace as I move through the penthouse.

Annika and I might be set free from this place soon. It's looking more and more like the assassination attempt may have been just run-of-the-mill mafia-related violence. Kir has a ton of enemies. So do Sota and Kenzo.

It feels weird to shrug off *being shot at*. Maybe that's what happens when you've been involved with the Bratva world for so long.

I smile fondly as I hear the low, rumbling tone of man speaking Russian in the other room.

Speak of the devil…

I find Kir sitting in the library of the two-story penthouse. He's in the chair behind the big desk, his back to me and his feet up on the credenza by the window as he looks out over the glittering Manhattan lights.

Kir has always been—well, not quite a father to me, but something close—more like a cool uncle, a protector who understands me better than most. I distinctly remember meeting him for the first time, when Damian finally introduced Annika and me to his uncle.

Some people demand power. Others constantly try to cling to it. Kir simply *is* power. It exudes from his pores and he exhales it with his every breath. He's the sort of guy who utterly commands a room just by walking into it and can silence a crowd with the slightest clear of his throat.

His eyes meet mine in the reflection of the glass in front of him. He swivels the chair, still holding the phone to his ear, a glass of whiskey in his other hand. He nods, giving me that small smile that never fails to make me feel safe.

"This conversation is over," he growls into the phone in his distinctive, uniquely accented voice.

Like the man himself, the accent is a product of the two worlds that built him. The aristocratic British lilt to his tone comes from his years at Oxford University; but before that, Kir was shaped by the streets of Moscow, and branded and beaten in a gulag prison for his criminal connections. That's the other facet of the man and the accent: rough, hardened, and distinctly, coldly Russian.

He ends the call and lowers the phone before he looks at me.

"You look like you've been through the wringer," Kir says, his sharp eyes concerned. "Everything okay?"

I shrug, trying to shake off my earlier exchange with Mal. "I'm fine. Just tired."

Kir studies me for a moment, steady and calm. "Come, join me," he says, gesturing to the chair across the desk from him. "You've been hiding in your room too much lately."

"Gee, I wonder why."

He gives me a look. "I'm about ready to give the all-clear for you and Annika to go back out into the world. You know how it is, Freya. I need to make sure no one is specifically gunning for my family."

My family.

I love that he unequivocally considers Anni and I as much family as he does Damian.

I take a seat, sinking into the plush leather chair. The weight of our relationship—the bond we've built over the years—settles around us, familiar and comforting. Kir has always been there for me, trusted me, believed in me when no one else did. In return, I've been fiercely loyal to him.

"You know me," I shrug. "I don't do well being cooped up."

"I know," he sighs. "And I'm sorry."

"But not *that* sorry."

He smirks. “Your and Annika’s safety is my priority. You’ll find no apology from me in that regard.”

I sigh. “It’s just…before the shooting… I’d been going to see Damian a lot.”

“I know. Soon, I promise. Damian’s in good hands, Frey. He’s got one more surgery slated for next week, and they’re extremely optimistic that he’ll be in full recovery after that.” He clears his throat: that’s his tell for switching the subject. “I wanted to ask you how the deep dive into Iosef Andreyev is going.”

There it is: subject officially changed.

I allow us to switch courses to the strategy we’ll use to blackmail the Bratva-connected head of a company Kir has his eye on acquiring, and we discuss some of the details of my work on that so far.

But my mind keeps wandering to Mal, and our phone call, and the dark energy that clings to him like a second skin. No matter how hard I try to shake it off, the tension lingers, settling in my chest like a leaden weight.

Kir leans back in his chair, watching me thoughtfully. “You’ve got that look,” he says, his voice calm but probing. “The one you get when you’re ready to fight.”

I smile faintly, but there’s no humor in it. “Guess it runs in the family.”

Kir chuckles, raising his glass to me in a mock toast. “That it does.”

This is a running joke between Kir, Annika and me. Saying dumb shit like “Good hair runs in the family,” as if either of us is *actually* related to the man who basically adopted us, or each other for that matter.

“By the way,” I frown. “Did you ever find what you were looking for in the data dump from Orlov Financial Solutions?”

I’d been waiting on Kir to tell me what specifically he was looking for in the information I gleaned from that disconnected server, the night I first crossed Mal’s path. But the other day, he just asked me for the whole pile of it, and said he could look through it himself.

Kir shrugs. “Yes.”

“And?”

He lifts a brow while keeping his lips sealed, in a very not so subtle way.

“You do know it makes my job a little easier if I know who we’re going after ahead of time? Are you trying to find something on the Grigorov Bratva?”

Kir clears his throat and pointedly asks me about another upcoming acquisition.

Goddamnit. This man and his subject changes.

But even as we continue talking, my mind is miles away, on *Mal*: a constant shadow in the corner of my thoughts, dark and unrelenting.

When I finally retreat to my room later that evening, I’m hoping to bury myself in work. Anything to take my mind off the tension coiled in my chest.

The moment I step into the room and close the door behind me, though, I freeze, my heart lurching into my throat.

A figure sits casually in the big chair in front of one of the huge floor-to-ceiling bullet-proof windows, dark against the neon flickering of the city behind him.

Mal.

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13

FREYA

My eyes slowly adjust to the darkness of the room. His ice-blue eyes—so bright and fierce that they almost give off a supernatural light of their own—watch me with an intensity that makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. My heart skips a beat, a cold shiver running down my spine.

"How did you get in here?" I blurt, my voice trembling despite my attempts to keep it steady. The penthouse is fortified, guarded by Kir's best men. *No one* gets in without permission. And yet, here we are.

His lips curl into a slow, predatory smile. But he doesn't offer an explanation or utter a single word.

My mind races as I try to make sense of how he's here. Of course he wasn't going to let my defiance go unanswered. But seeing him *here*, in Kir's penthouse, the heart of my world, makes me feel more exposed than ever.

I cross my arms over my chest, standing my ground. "I told you I couldn't come," I blurt, trying to hide the nervousness in my voice.

Mal still doesn't speak.

"I know we have an agreement," I blunder on. "I know what I agreed to. I just…couldn't, okay?" Fuck. My voice shakes.

I hesitate. Again, I could tell him the truth—explain my condition, how dangerous it is for me to be out in the sun. But I *really* don't want to give him another piece of myself to use against me.

The silence drags on, turning the anxious whining sensation in the back of my skull into a shrill scream. Finally, Mal clears his throat, raising a hand from the armrest of the chair and beckoning with two fingers.

“Come here.”

His voice is calm, but there’s an edge to it. A *warning* edge. When I hesitate, his eyes narrow slightly, peering at me, studying me.

Christ, he really is like a predatory animal.

“Do I need to repeat myself?”

I swallow uncomfortably, shaking my head, my arms still wrapped around myself. “N-no,” I mumble.

“Then come here.”

He crooks his fingers again, sending a traitorous, confusing tingle through my core. I start to walk slowly across the room to him. I only get halfway there before he raises a palm.

“Stop there.”

I frown. Then, in a voice that sends a shiver down my spine, he growls another command that sends a bolt of something filthy flashing through my core.

“Strip.”

My heart skips a beat, keeping me rooted to the spot. Mal’s jaw tightens in the shadows and the neon glow, his eyes boring into mine.

“*Now*,” he says—softly, but the command is unmistakable.

I think I knew, dimly, somewhere in the back of my mind, what “you’re mine” meant to a man like Mal. I didn’t dwell on it, but I *knew* the full extent of his threat and his decree that I do as he says, on pain of spilling my darkest secrets to the world.

But for the first time, I’m being faced with it head-on. It’s right here, full in my face, leering into my eyes with a hungry demand on its lips.

Strip.

I know deep down it's not going to stop with taking my clothes off. This isn't the end goal for him. It's merely the beginning of my submission. My unraveling. My downfall.

So why the *fuck* is my skin tingling like this? Why is my heart racing, not with dread but with a nervous energy bordering on excitement?

"If you need *assistance…*" His low, dark voice cuts through the room, sending a shiver down my spine. "Just ask."

I shake my head, my mouth dry.

This should be easy. It's just taking my clothes off. And it's not like I'm some naive teenager. I'm twenty-fucking-six years old, for fuck's sake.

But I don't have to ask myself why this is so difficult. I already know.

Because I've never done this before.

I've never been naked in front of a man. *Ever*. And the fact that it's about to happen is both terrifying and thrilling.

With a final deep, shaky breath, I begin to strip. My hands tremble as I pull off my hoodie. I try to keep my expression neutral as I turn to the side and peel off my black yoga pants. Then my black tank top.

When I'm down to just my underwear, I feel the full weight of my vulnerability as I turn back to him, half-heartedly hugging myself.

Mal arches a brow, his eyes raking over my body with both hunger and amusement, zoning in on the French lace demi-bra and bikini cut thong.

Again, it's my one "girly" indulgence.

Before I ran away from my old life, I had wealth. But I was too young to be spending it myself. After I ran away, it was a daily struggle for survival, first on my own and then with Anni.

Then one day, finally, we had money. Lots of money.

When people who have been without disposable income for a long time—or forever—finally get some cash, they all do different things. But generally, the normal response is to blow at least a little of it.

Some people buy a fancy car, or a new piece of tech like a big screen TV or a high end laptop. Some people go out to a ridiculously expensive dinner, or travel.

When I first got my taste of *real* money, I went out and bought a thousand-dollar set of *ultra* hot lingerie from Dita Von Teese's line: stockings, panties, garter belt, corset…the *works*.

Now why did I of all people—the girl who dresses in black hoodies and studded boots, who literally never takes her clothes off for anyone—go out and buy sexy lingerie?

Well, I'm no psychiatrist, but I can make an educated guess. I'm sure some of it was that I was just relieved not to be scrounging to survive on the streets. When you're scamming the machines at laundromats to wash the three changes of clothes you own, "sexy" and "lacy" aren't in your wardrobe.

I'd bet another part of it was that even though I had no interest in sleeping with or being intimate at all with anyone, I still wanted to feel sexy and like a woman—at least privately, for myself.

Elegant, expensive lingerie became my guilty pleasure, to the point that it's all I wear now. It's a perfect compromise. On the outside, I'm the walking, shit-talking, gothy middle finger held up to the world. Underneath it all, I get to be whatever suits my mood. Sexy. Confident. Slutty, even, without ever making myself vulnerable to another person.

The point is, *it's all for me*.

And now, for the first time, the lace armor I wear is on display to someone else. As if it's *for* someone else.

A hungry, predatory smile curls the corners of Mal's lips, his jaw resting on his thumb and a finger tracing up and down his cheekbone.

"You shouldn't have gotten all dressed up for me."

I scowl, defiant. “I didn’t. This is how I always dress.”

His lips twitch into a smirk as he eyes me, his finger still tracing up and down his cheekbone. “Well, considering you belong to me now—”

“I don’t,” I snap before I pause and clear my throat. “I don’t belong to anyone.”

Mal’s eyes flash, his voice dropping to a dangerous growl. “Yes, you do.”

His gaze sweeps over me with an intensity that makes my skin flush. “And considering that, I suppose this is all for me.” His eyes dart to mine. “Though I did tell you to *strip*.”

Heat floods my traitorous core. I tremble and reach for the strap to the demi-bra.

“No,” he mutters. “Leave it on.”

There’s a hungry amusement in his tone and his gaze.

“And come here.”

He crooks his fingers again. Fire sparks and claws inside me as I take one tentative step toward him.

Mal stops me with a shake of his head.

“Ah-ah-ah. On your hands and knees.”

I stare at him. “Excuse me?”

“You’re going to *crawl* to me.”

The room goes still. I swear, so does my pulse for a second as my eyes lock on him.

“Don’t ask me to repeat myself,” Mal growls. “You heard me the first time. *Crawl*.”

There’s something in his eyes. Or maybe his tone. Whatever it is, it feels like something else is controlling me as I feel myself slowly drop to my

knees. I lower my eyes, my cheeks flushed as I stare at the space in front of me and place my palms on the floor.

“Good girl.”

Fuck.

A dark, needy pulse throbs inside me at the words.

“Now—come to me.”

An arresting tingle ripples over my skin as I start to move, putting one hand and one knee forward, then the other, crawling across the floor to Mal until I’m right in front of him sitting back in the chair.

“Look at me.”

I barely can bring myself to, but I do, raising my face and my eyes until they’re captured by his piercing blue ones.

“Undo my belt.”

It feels like someone’s doused me in fire.

Again, I *knew* somewhere in the back of my mind that this is where this was going. I’m not that naïve. Of *course* Mal’s demand that I become “his” would be sexual in nature.

But *also* again, coming face to face with it is like jumping into the deep end without knowing how to swim.

And I don’t have a life vest.

“I don’t believe I stuttered.”

I shoot him a frosty look, shaking my head from side to side, as if I’m rendered speechless.

Maybe I am.

Getting up on my knees in front of him, I reach forward. My hands tremble, and my fingers feel weak when they brush the metal of his belt buckle. I

fumble at first, feeling as if I'm in a dream state. Finally, I get it loosened and undone.

"Next the button, and the zipper."

I can't meet his gaze. Not because I'm ashamed, or afraid.

But because I'm worried he'll see something in my eyes I can't let him see. It won't be shame. It won't be fear.

It'll be *need*.

The power imbalance here makes that even more fucked up. The fact that technically, I'm being forced to do this. Except I don't feel very forced right now. It could be that the very power imbalance is what has my skin tingling and my body aching for more.

I want to hate him for making me do this. And maybe I *do*. But not because of this.

Right now, I feel fucking *alive* in a way I'm not sure I ever have.

My fingers tremble as they pop the button of his black jeans, and then tug down the zipper, tooth by tooth. When I'm done, I swallow, sucking my bottom lip between my teeth.

Waiting.

"Do I need to tell you what to do next?" Mal rumbles quietly.

I'm not sure what to say, so I say nothing.

"Look at me."

I shiver when he reaches out, his big hand cupping my jaw and lifting my face to his.

"*Look at me*," Mal growls darkly. "And don't *stop* looking at me until I tell you to."

Our eyes lock. Something wicked and fierce flickers between us.

"Take out my cock."

My thighs squeeze together. Something dark pools inside of me.

…And I reach for him.

My pulse quickens, and my fingers shake as I reach for the waistband of his underwear. When I touch his skin for the first time, I feel a clenching pulse in my core. I half-expected someone as cold and vicious as Mal to be cool to the touch, like the undead or something.

Instead, he's almost scalding hot.

My hands shake as I pull down his briefs—lower and lower, my eyes dropping to the trail of dark hair leading down from his chiseled abs and navel, the v-lines of his hips distracting me as I pull the elastic down further.

That's where I stop.

I have no idea how to physically take his cock out of the confines of his briefs and his pants.

"Look at me, Freya," he commands, his voice low and rasping.

My eyes snap back to his. His own hands push mine aside, reaching into his briefs and pushing them and his pants lower down his hips. He pulls his hand out.

And my jaw fucking *drops*.

Holy. Fucking. *Shit*.

Being twenty-six years old and a virgin doesn't make me a prude. It also doesn't mean I've never seen a dick before. Not in *real life*, but I do watch a fair amount of aggressive, kinky porn.

Mal's bigger than *any* of the guys I've seen in those videos.

Like, a lot. Longer, and *definitely* thicker.

I stare at him, my cheeks flushed and my lips parted, my eyes locked on the fat, veined, throbbing shaft of his dick. He's got one of his big hands wrapped around the base of it, and there's *still* more than half of it sticking out.

A clear drop of precum beads at the swollen head and drips down a vein, sliding over his fingers, then down over his heavy, full balls.

“Eyes on me.”

I shiver as I drag my eyes away from his cock. His jaw ripples as something dark and fierce flashes in his eyes.

“Now swallow me.”

My breath catches. I want to say I hesitate, or freeze. But that wouldn’t be true.

Instead, slowly, still as if in a dream, I lean forward. My lips part slightly, and I shiver as I kiss the velvety hard underside of his dick.

A pulse ripples through my body. I feel my nipples tighten and harden against the lace demi-bra.

My thighs clench.

I do it again, kissing the underside of his head and then bringing my lips higher. I tingle all over when I kiss the hard ridge of his crown. It’s so soft and rock-hard at the same time, and I feel a tug of need when it jumps and twitches against my lips.

“I didn’t say kiss it goodnight,” Mal purrs. “I said *swallow it*.”

Both of his hands are suddenly in my hair, grabbing it up in a ponytail and gripping it tightly at the back of my skull. He tugs me forward, and I gasp quietly as he pulls my mouth against his dick. He grunts, rolling his hips and sliding the entire length of him over my lips. I wet them just before he pulls my mouth up to the head again.

“*Now*, Freya.”

And I obey.

My mouth opens, and before I know it, I’m sliding my lips down over his hot, swollen cock.

Barely.

He’s *huge*. And even when I stretch my jaw to its absolute limit, it feels like I’m barely managing to take the head inside. But I wrap my lips around him anyway, sucking tentatively as my tongue explores his head.

Mal *groans*, and the sound sends a powerful thrill through my body.

I did that.

Emboldened, I take more of him into my mouth, trying to swallow him down my throat. I don’t get very far before I gag, choking a little and pulling away. He allows me to back off slightly, but he keeps his fist tight in my hair as my eyes meet his.

“Do that again,” he murmurs quietly.

So I do, wrapping my lips back around his head and then taking him into the back of my throat. I gag again, coughing a little and then flushing crimson when I realize I’ve drooled on his cock. I pull back again, my cheeks throbbing as I bring up a hand to wipe it off.

“Uh-uh,” Mal growls tightly, his icy eyes locked with mine. “Leave it. In fact, I *want* you to spit on my cock.”

A fresh wave of heat floods my face as I stare at him. Again though, I might be inexperienced personally. But I still watch some pretty aggressive porn.

I know what he wants.

The thing is, *so do I*. I just never thought a guy in real life would want something so…*messy*. So dirty.

“Spit on my fucking cock, Freya,” he growls again.

I do, blushing again when I see my spit hit his swollen dick and drip down the shaft.

“*Good girl*,” he murmurs. “Again.”

I do as I’m told, my thighs clenching as heat pools between them.

“Now *suck*,” he commands. “Make a fucking *mess* of my cock. Be a dirty little slut for me.”

Be a dirty little slut for me.

For the millionth time, I wonder if something is wrong with me. Because when he says that, something in me unlocks. Like there was a door waiting to be opened, behind which I stashed all of my blackest fantasies and deviant desires, and he's just handed me the key.

The ache to be dominated. *Subjugated*.

To have all shreds of control taken from me.

To be *used*.

Mal might be the devil. He might be a monster, and he might be holding my life over my head.

But right now, he also happens to be indulging me in the darkest desires I've ever had.

So even though the fighter in me wants to curse him and bite his dick off, the subby, horny, achy little mess on her knees in front of him wants nothing else but to give up oxygen for his cock.

You can guess which Freya wins.

I whimper as I allow him to yank my head forward by my hair. I spit on his cock again, biting back a moan at the dirty thrill it gives me. My mouth swallows his swollen head, choking and gagging on it as spit runs down the shaft and drips from his balls.

A moan rumbles deep in my chest as Mal seizes all control, taking my hair in his hands and guiding my mouth roughly up and down his slick, messy cock. He groans, pulling me off him, spit dripping between my bottom lip and his head. He pulls my mouth down to his balls, and I moan as I gently suck each swollen orb into my mouth and tongue them eagerly.

Mal grunts, tugging my hair with one hand and fisting his cock with the other as I slurp wetly on his balls.

"Such a fucking *messy* little cumslut," he growls. "You look so fucking pretty between my legs with my cock on your face."

Fuck. Me.

It’s no longer up for discussion. I’m definitely, unquestionably, completely fucked in the head. Because the more degrading he is with his actions, and the rougher he is with his words, the wetter I get. The more he takes control, the more I want to submit entirely.

I’m not just doing this because he knows my secrets, or because I’m scared of him.

I’m slobbering all over his balls and moaning with his heavy cock resting on my face because this man makes me *want* to be a messy little slut for him.

I whimper as he pulls me back to his cock and shoves it into my mouth. A thrill explodes through me as he grabs my hair in a fist and wraps his other hand around my throat. He starts to thrust into me roughly, no longer “getting head” from me but “fucking my mouth.”

I’ve never been wetter.

“Look at you, squirming and squeezing your thighs together like a greedy, anxious, drippy little *slut*, Freya,” he growls, grunting as he fucks his cock into the back of my throat, making me gag. “Touch yourself. Finger that soaking little pussy while you drool on my cock like a good girl.”

My eyes roll back. It’s embarrassing how quickly my hand flies between my legs, pulling my panties aside before sinking a finger into myself with a groan. My thumb rolls over my clit as I gag and choke and drool all over Mal’s huge cock, stroking it with my free hand as he grips my hair and my throat.

I’m pretty good at making myself come. Still, it usually takes a while.

Not fucking tonight.

Tonight, on my knees in front of this man, with my lips stretched lewdly around his fat cock while spit dribbles down my chin, it’s like I’m already at third base. My throbbing clit tingles and aches as I rub it wildly, my thighs shaking.

“My, my, *my*,” he rumbles. “I think you’re ready to come for me already, aren’t you, my little slut? Are you going to be good, greedy little whore and make that pretty pussy come with my big, fat cock in your mouth?”

It’s like pulling a trigger.

My thighs tighten. My pulse skips. With a deep, guttural moan, I scream out my release around his cock, still buried in my mouth, as I feel myself start to come.

Hard.

With a grunt, Mal pulls out of my mouth. He pushes me back onto my heels as he strokes his throbbing, veined, glistening cock, watching me coming all over my fingers. He lets out a snarling groan, and his cock flexes and twitches.

…And suddenly, he’s coming too.

Everywhere.

I moan louder as the thick rope of white cum explodes from his swollen head, splattering over my breasts and neck. I flinch, whimpering when the next spurt lands across my tongue and my lips. A third covers my chin, and a fourth hits my cheek.

He’s still coming.

My eyes roll back in pure, filthy, deviant pleasure as I keep rubbing myself, moaning as Mal strokes his cock and *covers me* with his hot, sticky cum.

With a cry and a wrench of my body, I feel myself start to come again, shaking as I explode for him a second time.

Then the room goes still and quiet. My breathing is ragged and deep as I sit back on my heels, trembling and shaking.

What. Just. Happened.

His cum coats my face and my chest. His eyes lock with mine.

“*Good girl*,” he murmurs.

He reaches out as if to cup my face, but instead, his thumb pushes through the sticky mess on my cheek, nudging it toward my mouth.

My lips part. My eyes are locked on his as I take his thumb and his cum into my mouth and suck.

Mal does it again, scooping cum up from my face and chest and slowly feeding it to me. His cock throbs between us, as if he's getting off watching me suck his sticky jizz from his fingers.

Honestly… I might be, too.

When I'm relatively cleaned off, Mal stands and tucks his still-hard cock into his jeans. I start to get to my feet, but he stops me with a shake of his head.

"Stay right there, on your knees," he growls quietly. "Close your eyes."

I swallow, tasting his cum on my tongue as our gazes clash.

"*Close your eyes*," he commands.

I do. Then I shiver when I feel his hand stroke the top of my head.

"I'm going to leave. You're going to stay right there, on your knees, and count in your head to one hundred. Then, you're going to touch that needy little pussy again while thinking of my cock, until you come again."

I gasp when his fingers tangle in my hair, tugging it in his fist.

"*I'll know* if you don't do as I say. I trust you realize that?"

I nod. "*Yes*," I whisper.

"Good girl."

Goddammit. That fucking phrase and its power over me.

It's silent for a moment. I almost think he's left already. But then my pulse skips when I feel him lean down, his breath in my ear.

"*You look so pretty on your knees with my cum on your face*."

My core tightens, my entire body rippling with heat as the words slip over me. He pulls away again, and the silence drags on. And on.

I start to count in my head. When I hit one hundred, it's not even a question of "if" my hand moves between my thighs. I start to rub my clit again, shuddering as I replay the sensations of him using my mouth, fucking my face.

Of being on my knees submissively for him.

I might hate Mal. He might be a monster holding the life I've built over my head to satisfy his sick desires.

But the thing is, it seems to be satisfying *my* sick desires just as much.

My finger is a blur over my throbbing clit. My other hand clutches at my breasts, pinching and teasing my nipples through the lace before sliding it up to my throat. I squeeze, desperate for that same rush that he brought me, choking myself before my fingers creep up to my mouth. I run them over my lips, capturing the last sticky drips of his cum there and sucking them off eagerly as my core seizes up and my thighs quiver.

With a muffled moaning cry, I'm coming, sucking his cum from my fingers as I explode against my fingers.

When I open my eyes, he's gone.

I'm alone.

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14

MAL

I CROUCH in the darkness outside Kir's mansion, the scope of my rifle trained on the lit office windows. My finger hovers over the trigger, more for comfort than anything else. I'm not here to take a shot tonight, even if the windows *weren't* bulletproof.

Which they definitely are.

In the crosshairs, I see Kir lean back in his chair, sipping whiskey, the light catching the sharp angles of his face. He looks calm, collected—every bit the powerful Bratva leader.

But I know better. I've seen cracks in that façade at time. I've seen him rattled, if only momentarily.

I watched him that night the sky was filled with fire and the stench of death.

I saw him standing in the wreckage of my family home after the massacre that ripped my life apart. The blood was still fresh on the ground. The house was still ablaze.

And Kir Nikolayev was walking through the ruins like a ghost.

He had no business with my family. He had no reason to be there.

Except maybe to gloat?

To smile at the destruction?

Who knows.

The image of him standing there, surrounded by the corpses of my family, is burned into my mind. It's a memory that refuses to die, no matter how many years have passed. It’s why I’m here now, watching him.

Kir takes another sip of his drink, blissfully unaware of my presence, completely relaxed. I let my finger drift off the trigger and settle lower, my eyes focusing on the room behind him. My attention shifts to the mantelpiece, where a row of photographs sits in neat, polished frames.

I adjust the scope, zooming in. The first photo is of Annika and Kir, sitting at a fancy restaurant together. Another, much older, is of a teenaged Kir with his arm around a young girl who looks very much like him.

Polina, his late sister; mother of Damian, still in the hospital.

My scope drifts to the left, and I frown when it lands on more framed pictures.

Of Freya.

There’s one of her with Kir—some Nikolayev family event, perhaps. She’s smiling, laughing, carefree.

Carefree.

It’s almost laughable. If only Kir knew the truth about the girl he’s been treating like a daughter all these years. If only he knew who she really was, what blood runs in her veins. *Lindqvist* blood—killers and betrayers, all of them.

Her father orchestrated the betrayal that shattered my world, and took Polina Nikolayev’s and her husband’s lives. Freya’s part of that legacy, whether she admits it or not.

I almost want to feel smug about it. I’ve started my revenge, haven’t I? Sunk my claws into her? Marked her, dirtied her, tainted the girl Kir’s kept so carefully under his wing?

The thought should satisfy me immensely.

It doesn’t.

Because she was *very* into it. More than I expected. Freya wasn't just some passive player in my game—she wanted and craved it, and that changes everything. Blurs the clean lines I drew for this revenge.

It's one thing to bend someone to your will. To have them look at you with needy hunger—that's a different kind of power entirely. Power I didn't expect her to hand me so willingly.

I think about her eyes, so wide with fear and excitement, so eager for more. The way her breath caught when I touched her and her body responded to every command I gave her.

I linger a few moments longer, my focus drifting back to Kir. The need to end him, to see the fear in his eyes the moment he realizes who I am and why I'm after him—it's a craving that gnaws at my insides, a hunger I've been feeding for years.

But I'm patient. I can wait.

I lower the rifle, disappearing back into the shadows, my movements silent and practiced. The guards are lazy—Kir thinks he's untouchable in this fortress of his.

He's wrong.

I easily slip past the security cameras, moving like a shadow across the grounds until I'm out of sight. Once I clear the perimeter, I take a deep breath, letting the tension roll off me in waves.

I should head back…regroup…plan my next move. But as I slip the rifle into the hidden compartment in the trunk of my car, my mind drifts to Freya.

I can still feel her skin under my fingers, her warm, trembling breath as she wrapped her mouth around me.

She thinks she's in control of her world; thinks she can dictate the terms of our arrangement.

She's wrong. She's *mine.*

I smile to myself, closing the compartment and glancing back toward the mansion one last time.

I want to feel satisfied, but all I feel is anticipation.

I slip into the car, the engine purring to life as I pull away from Kir’s estate, the shadows of the past still clinging to me as I roar into the night.

I’m not even the smallest bit done watching her tonight.

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15

FREYA

I MOAN A MUFFLED cry as my thighs clamp around his hand. Fireworks explode in my vision as the orgasm crashes through my core. My world is turned upside-down as my head hangs off the side of the bed, and I shiver when Mal's fingers tighten around my neck.

He groans, shoving his cock into the back of my throat as I come on his fingers. I feel his huge dick pulse and throb in my mouth as his release follows my own, his warm, sticky cum flooding my tongue. I almost choke, but I keep my lips sealed tight around him, my throat bobbing up and down in his grip as I swallow over and over.

He tastes…*sweet*. And salty. So *him*.

His fingers lazily roll over my clit, sending more shudders and tremors flickering through my body like wildfire. I whine in pleasure, twisting and writhing as my tongue swirls around his swollen head.

Mal slips his cock from my mouth, running the head over my lips and then smearing it across my cheek.

It should be utterly demeaning, vile and insulting. Except for the small matter of me being fucked in the head and *loving* it.

This is the second time Mal's just somehow…*appeared* in my room. The second time he's told me to "swallow his cock like a good little cumslut". Just like the last time, he might as well be inside my twisted little head.

Because he *knows* the dark, deviant, fucked-up fantasies that I keep hidden behind that locked door inside me.

To an *alarming* degree.

For instance, just yesterday, memories of the first time he came over were running a rampage through my head, turning me into a puddle. So *obviously*, I pulled up some of the …*rougher* videos I've bookmarked and watched them, fingering myself and biting back a moan as I watched a dominant guy fuck a pretty brunette's mouth with his thick cock as she hung her head off the side of the bed.

And now here we are, positioned just like that. It's as if he's reading my thoughts. Like he *knows* every button to push with me.

Mal rubs the still-hard head of his cock over my mouth again, tapping it against my lips before stepping back. My heart pounds in my chest, each beat echoing the confused desire that's been twisting inside me since the moment he first laid his hands on me.

I still don't get how he manages to slip past Kir's guards. It's like the man can just disappear into the shadows and reappear when it suits him. Right now, though, I'm not sure if I'm more terrified of the implications of that or the way my body reacts every time he touches me.

I roll over and swing my legs around to sit on the edge of the bed. I turn to reach for my hoodie.

"What are you doing?"

The dark, sultry tone of his voice makes me stop. When I turn back to him, my breath catches.

So far, even though he's come down my throat twice now, I've never seen Mal naked. Both times, he's kept his pants and shirt on and just pulled out his dick.

But now, when I turn to him, I find myself faced with the sight of his bare torso in the shadowy light, his muscles grooved and chiseled as if carved from stone.

Holy shit.

My eyes trace over the dark, intricate *irezumi* style Yakuza ink mixed with other, more traditional western tattoos all over his skin. I knew Mal was inked, but *shit*.

He's covered.

His lips curl at the wide-eyed look I'm sure he sees on my face.

"I…" I swallow. "I was just getting dressed."

"I fail to see the point," he growls. He bends to pull off his jeans, tossing them aside before he stalks toward me. "Seeing as I'm about to bury my cock in your messy little cunt."

Holy fuck.

It's another thing I suppose I knew was coming. At some point, this unholy arrangement between us would entail fucking him. Or more like him fucking *me*.

There's just the tiny, insignificant, barely-even-an-issue fact that…well…

I've never done this before. And suddenly, I find myself scrambling back across the bed, my breath caught in my throat as Mal prowls toward me like a jungle cat ready to devour me whole.

I've thought of my "first time" over the years. I've imagined what that would entail, and how I'd ever even get to the point where I'd want to sleep with someone. Would it be a boyfriend? Or would I just rip the Band-Aid off, download Tinder, and find some rando to fuck me?

I've never imagined losing it to a psycho like Mal, though, and especially not in the context of an "arrangement" like ours.

"Spread your legs," he growls as he climbs onto the bed with me, his cock rock-hard and his body rippling with thick muscles and ink. "And show me *my* fucking pussy."

I can barely breathe. I push away from him a little bit, even as my legs fall open for him.

His muscled thighs push between mine. He leans down over me, pushing my arms above my head and pinning them there as he lowers his mouth to my breasts. I moan when he sucks a pale, tight, pierced nipple into his mouth. He bites down, making me cry out sharply and then immediately arch my back eagerly as his tongue soothes the bite.

His swollen cock nudges against my entrance, easing against my lips as my whole body tenses and goes still.

Suddenly, so does Mal.

“Are you a virgin?”

The question hits like a punch, and I force myself to look away, determined to keep my voice steady. “No.”

Mal’s hand slides up to my chin, gripping it firmly and turning my face toward him, forcing me to meet his intense gaze.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not—”

“*Don’t*,” he snaps, cutting me off with a voice so sharp it makes my stomach twist. His grip tightens slightly, not painfully, but enough to send a clear message.

Mal’s brow furrows. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-six,” I mumble, my face turning scarlet.

Yeah, this part definitely crossed my mind when I imagined losing it: what to say if someone questioned it being my first time at *this* age.

I just never imagined how pathetically awkward it would be.

“And I’m right, aren’t I.”

I don’t say anything. My lip twists between my teeth as I look away.

Mal leans down and bites one of my nipples.

Hard.

I squeal, gasping sharply as the pain rips my attention back to him.

"*Aren't I*."

"*Yes*," I finally mumble, my face throbbing. "Happy?"

He doesn't say a thing. But suddenly, he's pulling away, sliding off me and getting out of bed. I frown, confused by and, embarrassingly, *hating* the rejected feeling I have in my chest as I watch him turn and start pulling his jeans back on.

Jesus Christ, am I *upset* that the psycho has decided not to fuck me for the first time?

Seek professional help, self.

Mal pulls on his shirt and turns to eye me as I curl up on the bed and pull the sheets over my nudity.

"Tomorrow night," he mutters. "We'll fix that."

I blink, my mind racing. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I'm going to take your virginity, Freya," Mal says, his voice matter of fact, like he's stating something as simple as the weather. "This arrangement doesn't work if you're a virgin."

My heart pounds wildly as I scramble for something to say. "I'm…busy tomorrow. It's Annika's bachelorette party."

It's not even a lie. It's legit what I've got planned for tomorrow.

Mal says nothing as he stalks back to the bed. He reaches out and cups my chin, sliding his fingers down to my throat as he leans close.

"*I don't care*."

The darkness in his tone sends a wave of fear crashing through me, laced with something else—something I'm ashamed to admit.

Like everything he makes me feel.

"Tomorrow," Mal growls softly. "You're mine."

His words hang in the air long after he’s gone, and my body is still trembling when I crawl into bed as dawn begins to break over the Manhattan skyline.

Needless to say, sleep doesn’t come easily.

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16

FREYA

THINGS HAVE A WAY OF…*ESCALATING* when Annika and I get together.

Quickly.

But tonight may just set a new record.

A loud, alcohol-fueled snore pulls my attention around behind me. I snort as I glance at Annika, face down on one of two hotel beds, still in her party dress, her red hair spread wide around her like a crime scene.

The other bed is occupied by Hana Mori, Kenzo's sister—who, it turns out, is *super fucking cool*. She's also fast asleep after getting wasted with us. But unlike the hot mess in the other bed that is my best friend, Kenzo's sister is her usual surgically put-together self.

Her silvery, white-blonde hair is *perfect*, tucked back and to the side across the pillow. The dress she wore tonight is hung on a hanger on the bathroom door. She's actually under the covers, neatly, face-up, with her hands folded across her chest.

…I mean the girl is wearing a fucking *eye mask*.

I've *dreamed* of having my shit as together as Hana does when she's even just fucking *sleeping*.

I too have been drinking all night. But I paced myself, which is good considering the whole car chase thing and crossing the border and all that.

I *did* say things had escalated quickly.

The night started innocently enough. Annika's sister Taylor took Annika, her friend Fumi—who's actually Kenzo's half-sister, but that's a long story—and me out for an *insanely* amazing dinner at an incredible three-star Michelin restaurant. Taylor and Fumi had to leave after dinner because they've got court early tomorrow morning, being hot-shot lawyers. That's when Anni and I were joined by Hana.

I blame the karaoke that came next as the first domino that started everything that brought us here. The several rounds of drinks probably didn't help. Neither did the three of us showing off our "hidden talents".

Hana, for instance, can take a shot without using her hands. As for me, I found a group of drunk, stupid, horny finance douchebros and told one I wanted to connect with him later and let him "fuck me like an animal".

…The epitome of my "dirty talk". Lame, I know.

The point wasn't to screw the douchebag. It was to get him to hand me his unlocked phone so I could give him my number.

Instead, I promptly Venmo-ed myself five grand from his checking account.

And that's when Annika, Hana, and I decided to get the hell out of Dodge.

It was outside the club though that things really went south. Like an idiot, I told Hana that Anni was a master thief. That she could steal anything. "Even sports cars!" I bragged.

And it would seem Hana is as much a situation escalator as Anni and I are. Because soon we were basically daring Annika to break into the freaking Bugatti parked down the street.

Before I knew it, the three of us were joyriding around Lower Manhattan in a stolen three-hundred-thousand-dollar supercar, and the cops showed up behind us. To make it even more fun, I had a lit joint, and Hana had a gun in her purse that she didn't *exactly* have a permit for.

Yeah.

If we were smart, we would have cut our losses and hired a good lawyer right then. But, screw that.

I exhale, taking a sip of the vodka in my glass, courtesy of the hotel room mini bar. I turn back to the window and lean my forehead against it, looking out over Montreal.

Yeah. Montreal.

Again, I can't quite underline the word "escalated" enough.

A car chase to get away from the cops turned into a *highway chase* to get away from the state troopers. At that point, you might as well go for broke, right?

So that's what we did. We just…*booked it*. An hour later, roaring up I-87, we'd lost them.

Thanks, stupidly fast stolen supercar.

Pretty soon, we realized we really weren't that far from the Canadian border. And since it *was* a bachelorette party, and we *were* all hyped up on adrenaline, we said screw it and kept going. We ditched the car and Hana's gun in a small border town, took a taxi through Customs, and pretty soon we were at a club in downtown Montreal losing our minds on the dance floor.

It's worth mentioning that Annika's wedding to Kenzo is *tomorrow*.

Oops.

The three of us have been avoiding all calls and texts from Kir's and Kenzo's camps, asking where we are. But those aren't the texts I'm worried about right now as I stare out over the city.

I'm worried about the ones I ignored from *him*.

Mal.

Shivering, I glance down at Mal's texts on my almost-dead phone:

MAL

I'm in your room with a very hard dick, ready to fuck you for the first time. And yet, curiously, you're not here.

My pulse quickens.

MAL

I was very clear. Tonight is the night I'm going to tear through that pretty little pussy for the first time and make you scream for my cock. We had plans, Freya. Involving your virgin blood and my cum staining your sheets.

I mean Jesus Christ, who even talks like that?

MAL

Since you're not here, I can only assume you're ready to play out one of your other more…deviant…fantasies.

MAL

If you're hiding from me, it means you want me to find you. And chase you.

My blood turns to fire as my eyes sweep over the texts again.

MAL

And when I catch you, I will pin you to the ground and fuck you however I want, in any hole I want, like the greedy little cumslut you are.

I want to be incensed. I want to text him back that he's delusional, that our arrangement does NOT include him hunting me down to, well, *yeah*.

Except…

He's not wrong. That *is* one of my—okay, my *most*—dangerous, dark fantasies. When the hardcore videos of rough sex and domination and submission aren't enough, that's where I go:

Consensual non-consent.

Primal play.

Rape fantasy.

I mean, I don't *actually* want to be raped, for fuck's sake. Even *my* questionable sexual fantasies and general state of mind have limits and lines, and that's well past them.

But the idea of taking that loss of control to a whole new level is…*hot*. The idea of someone hunting me down, and pinning me to the ground, and taking what they want?

Yeah.

As a *fantasy*, that is. In real life, it just sounds deranged, even to me.

Just as I'm about to pour another drink and see if the front desk has a phone charger I can borrow since none of us brought one, my phone pings with a new text.

MAL

You're proving harder to hunt than I expected.

My pulse skips and I grin, flirtatious heat flooding my face. Hell, maybe it's just the alcohol.

Maybe both.

I knock back the last of my vodka, my tongue swiping the last few drops from my lips before I set the glass down and bring up the phone.

ME

I'm far away from your clutches.

His response is instant.

MAL

You're NEVER out of my clutches.

Feeling reckless from the booze and the adrenaline of the night, I type out another message.

ME

I'm out getting some air. Looking for a phone charger. How about you?

Okay, what the *fuck* is this. Our “arrangement” or “blackmail situationship” or whatever this insanity is between Mal and I is supposed to be just…well, I guess we’ve never exactly defined it, aside from “I do whatever he wants or he ruins my life”. But late-night flirting over text seems out of bounds.

MAL

And where exactly ARE you out, looking for a phone charger?

I freeze. Like *hell* am I telling him where I am. Not because I’m worried about the psycho coming to find me in another country…though I wouldn’t put it past him…but because the three of us are probably freaking out a lot of people back home, being that Kenzo and Annika’s wedding is *tomorrow*, and the bride has fled the country in a stolen Bugatti.

ME

Just out. God, you’re so needy.

I grin impishly as I send it.

Fuck me. I *am* flirting with him.

Mal’s response is swift, and sends a chill down my spine.

MAL

You should be careful. It’s nighttime. You’re alone. You never know what kind of monsters are lurking in the dark.

My fingers tighten around the phone, my pulse spiking and a prickling sensation creeping up the back of my neck. I tell myself it’s nothing, just Mal messing with me.

Then my phone buzzes again.

MAL

Your safe word will be “neon”.

The words hit like a punch, my stomach flipping as I jerk my head up, scanning the shadows of the room. My heart is pounding now.

I mean what the *fuck*.

ME

Creep much?

There’s no response. Not even any little dots. Though I can tell he’s read my text.

ME

Keep looking, psycho. I’m safe from you tonight.

He reads that one, too. Still no reply.

An hour later, there’s *still* no reply, and I’m getting antsy pacing the dark hotel room while my friends snore drunkenly in the background. The concierge downstairs does *not* have a phone charger I can use. But apparently the rooftop bar at the hotel down the street is open late-late, and they probably have one.

Perfect.

This Montreal jaunt wasn’t exactly planned. So I don’t have anything to change into. But my dress from dinner and karaoke earlier seems okay for a ritzy late-night hotel bar.

The streets are fairly empty as I head down the block, around the corner, and into the hotel. An elevator brings me to the rooftop bar, which is packed with late-night partiers.

I spend the next two hours sipping a few cocktails, politely—and then not-so-politely—telling a group of finance douchebags to fuck off and leave me alone, even doing a little work for Kir on my now-charged phone.

Must be guilt from ignoring his texts earlier.

At last call I grab one more drink, settle up, and make my way downstairs.

The streets are even quieter and more desolate now. A chill ripples up my spine, but I tell myself it’s just the temperature. I mean, I am in Canada.

I start to walk back to our hotel. But at the corner, that same group of douchebags from the club is hanging out, smoking cigarettes.

Yeah, hard pass on that terrible situation waiting to happen.

I backtrack to the hotel with the rooftop bar and walk around the block in the other direction. A row of buildings is under heavy construction, with

scaffolding covering the front and one of those walkways they build near urban construction sites for pedestrians: basically a wooden hallway built around the metal poles of the lower scaffolding.

The temporary lights flicker as I step into the wooden hallway. I swallow nervously, glancing behind me and then to the entire block of covered walkway ahead of me.

It's fine, I tell myself. *You're fine*.

I start to walk, wishing I had my big set of keys with the little pepper spray can attached. But I left those back in New York.

I'm about a third of the way through the walkway when the lights flicker again.

Then I hear it—footsteps. Slow. Deliberate. Closing in behind me.

I spin around with a scream on my lips.

…There's no one there.

Silence hangs like a shroud around me. The lights flicker and buzz again. My breath becomes short gasps, my mind racing.

Fuck this.

I turn and prepare to run. Except I'm in stupid fucking heels. So I start to power-walk, trying to get out of this enclosed hallway as fast as possible. I mean fuck, I'd even take the finance douchebags at this point.

I'm nearing the end when I hear it again—footsteps, louder this time. Closer. Then, a shadow moves in the corner of my vision.

I whirl.

The scream gets trapped in my throat.

…And a figure in a black mask lunges out of the shadows at me, less than ten feet away.

Pure terror explodes through me. Without thinking, I whirl, my eyes locking on the thin film of plastic covering the workers' entrance to the construction

zone.

It’s closer than the end of the hallway.

I turn and bolt through the plastic film, hurtling blindly into the darkness beyond, my pulse thudding in my ears and a monster’s footsteps closing in behind me.

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17

FREYA

My heart hammers in my chest frantically, drowning out everything else as my feet pound against the ground.

Shadows stretch long and jagged around me, the skeletal frames of buildings looming like sinister giants in the moonlight. The construction site is a labyrinth of rusted beams and broken glass, and I can barely see through the panic clouding my vision.

But I can hear him behind me.

The masked man with dark violence radiating off him like poison.

I don't know who he is or why he's after me. Maybe this is a follow-up to the shooting on Sota's rooftop. Maybe I *was* the target, and now they've sent him to finish the job.

I can feel him closing in, his presence a shadow that's seeping into my skin. His heavy footsteps echo behind me, each one a reminder that I'm not far enough ahead of him.

I dart around a pile of debris, my dress catching on a jagged piece of metal. I yank it free, the fabric tearing as I stumble forward. My body is shaking, fear and adrenaline crashing together in waves, but I don't stop.

I can't.

I hear him behind me, closer now. He's relentless, his pace never slowing. My heart lurches as I glance over my shoulder, seeing him emerging from

the shadows—tall, broad, terrifying. The mask he wears conceals everything, even his eyes. There's just a faceless black void holding the promise of violence.

A predator.

I round a corner, my heart climbing into my throat and my breathing labored.

Too late.

He's there, waiting for me, as if he knows every step I'll take before I make it.

His hand shoots out, grabbing my arm in a vice-like grip. I scream, but the sound dies in my throat as he hurls me to the ground with brutal force. The impact knocks the air from my lungs. The rough concrete scrapes against my skin as I try to scramble away, but he's on me in a second.

His gloved hand grips my ankle, dragging me back to him with terrifying ease. My mind races with a thousand disjointed thoughts, each one darker than the last.

Is this where my life ends?

When he lets go of my ankle, I make one last desperate, pathetic attempt to scramble back. But he slams me down again, his knees planting on either side of my writhing torso, boxing me in, towering over me like a shadow of death.

He's silent. Not a word, not a sound. Just the clean, methodical movements of a man who's done this before.

I shudder as his hand shoots out and grabs the front of my dress. He grunts, pulling hard and tearing the fabric with a viciousness that leaves me trembling. The dress falls away, the cool night air biting my exposed skin. He yanks again, shredding and ripping the dress from my torso and my arms, leaving me bare from the waist up except for the black lacy bralette I wore underneath.

He rips that away, too, and now, I don't think he's here to kill me.

Not yet.

He’s got something else in mind first.

My brain screams at me to fight, to claw and kick, but fear has me paralyzed. His hands maul my breasts, pinching my nipples and twisting and tugging my piercings mercilessly. A strong hand wraps tight around my neck, and I choke out a cry as he reaches back with his other one.

A sob wrenches from my lips as he shoves my dress up to my waist and thrusts his hand into my panties. He rips the flimsy lace away with a sharp tug that snaps at my skin. I try and close my legs, but he slaps my thighs harshly, shoving them apart as he cups my pussy roughly.

The monster looms down right into my face. I can see the glossy black film covering the eyeholes now, his black mask an emotionless, silent void.

Then he reaches up and yanks the mask up over his leering mouth.

“*Remember your safe word*,” he rasps, his voice low, dangerous…

…and familiar.

“*Neon, and this all goes away.*”

Everything freezes. The world stops turning.

What. The. Fucking. FUCK.

His words slice through the fog of terror like a blade.

It’s him.

I don’t know how, but it’s him.

Mal.

The realization sends a wave of confusion and relief crashing over my senses. My heart is still hammering in my chest, my body trembling beneath him, but now I know this isn’t a killer. This isn’t some psycho come to end me.

This is Mal.

And yet, knowing it’s him and not a stranger doesn’t exactly make things feel “safe”. The adrenaline is still roaring like a beast inside me. Like my blood *knows* how real a threat the psychopath looming over me is.

The fear, the chase, the roughness—it’s all part of the game. But this time it’s darker, more dangerous, more...*real*.

He grabs my wrists, shoving them over my head as he leans down into my neck. I scream when I feel his teeth bite me, breaking the skin. I can feel the heat radiating off him, the raw, savage energy. My fear hasn’t disappeared completely—it’s mutated into something else. Something darker that terrifies me in an entirely different way.

I should stop this. I should say the word and *end it*.

But I don’t.

Instead, I tilt my head back, gasping as Mal first savages my neck, then dips his lips to my nipples. I cry out, my back arching involuntarily as he bites a tender pink nipple and sucks it into his mouth. He tongues my piercing, twisting it roughly and sending an explosively electric feeling zapping through my core.

His other hand shoves my thighs apart again, and before I can think, he’s ramming two thick fingers into my pussy. I whimper as I feel my traitorous slickness coat his hand. He’s rough and uncaring, thrusting his fingers in and out of me with a lewd, wet, squelching sound as he bites down hard on my other nipple.

His mouth pulls away, his teeth still clamped around the little metal barbell so tight I swear he’s going to tear it out. Then it pops free of his mouth, and I feel him move up. I feel his warm breath on my lips. When I open my eyes his mask is gone, and I lose myself in the fierce, wild, unhinged blue of his eyes. His face hovers inches from mine until suddenly, it slams even closer.

I don’t consider that this is the first time I’ve kissed him until it’s happening. His lips crash against mine with brutal force, the kiss savage and claiming, and I melt beneath the heat of it. His hands roam over my

body, rough and unyielding, leaving a trail of bruises in their wake. There's no tenderness in his touch, only a raw, primal need that mirrors my own.

His teeth graze my lower lip and then he's pulling back just far enough to let his piercing eyes burn into mine, a dangerous mix of lust and fury swirling in their depths.

He pulls the mask back down over the top half of his face, forcing me to look into the black void of the monster's eyes, the ferocious leer of his dark smile grinning down on me like a maniac.

"You crave this," he growls, his voice low. "You *like* getting chased, and pinned down, and *used* like a dirty little slut."

His lips curl into a dark smile, and then he's on me again, his mouth finding the hollow of my throat, his hands sliding down my body with a roughness that leaves me breathless. His teeth graze my skin, and my breath catches as the line between pleasure and pain blurs.

Mal shoves my legs up, pinning my knees to my bare breasts and spreading them wide apart. I feel him reach between us and hear the jangle of his belt and the tug of his zipper.

I whimper when his hot, thick cock springs free and slaps against my pussy. He does it again, rubbing the swollen head over my clit before pushing it down, feeling it spread my lips as he presses against my opening.

Ready to take me, claim me.

Swallow me whole, until there's nothing left.

For one brief second, I think about stopping this fucking madness. He *gave* me a way out.

Neon.

I say that word, and this is over. One little word, and I *don't* lose my fucking virginity to a psychopath with a mask, rough concrete and dirt under my back and the jagged lines of the unfinished building above us like ragged bones of a monstrous skeleton clawing at the moon.

"I can't wait to feel your blood and cum soak my cock, little toy."

The sheer insanity of it all silences me before I can even think to say my safe word.

So I don't.

Instead, my hands shove under his t-shirt to claw at his bare skin. The black void of his masked eyes locks on me. His lips curl dangerously.

Then he rams into me.

Hard.

I scream, my body jolting and spasming as my hips jerk against him. It fucking *hurts*, but he keeps going, pushing deeper before he slowly drags back out until just the swollen head is inside.

Then he sinks in again, deeper this time.

The pain begins to melt. The sting of the initial penetration begins to abate as Mal's thick, massive cock sinks into me, so fucking deep I swear I can feel him in my throat. He draws back out, rolling his hips and letting the head tease in and out of me until I'm clawing at his skin and desperately mewling for more like a greedy little thing.

"*There's a good little virgin*," he murmurs darkly.

His hips thrust, driving his entire length into me as I cry out in savage pleasure.

"*Such* a good girl, taking that big dick," he snarls. "What a greedy, *slutty* little pussy, getting all stretched out by my fat cock."

He pounds into me again, harder this time. His hand wraps around my throat, my legs draped over his muscled shoulders as he fucks into me like an animal.

Taking control.

Blurring the lines between sanity and insanity. Between consent and not. Between fear and desire.

And my body craves it *all*.

The world narrows to just us—two bodies, wrestling for control, for dominance, for something more primal than either of us is willing to admit. The sounds of the city, the cold bite of the concrete beneath us—it all fades away, leaving only the heat of our skin and the electric tension between us as he thrusts into me harder, faster, bending my very reality.

His hands bruise, his lips and teeth bite and suck, and I feel the world slipping away as the darkness envelops me.

In one blinding moment of clarity, I reach up. My fingers claw at his mask, yanking it up his face until his ice-blue eyes stab into me.

I know it is madness, but I need to look into his eyes without a mask between us when this happens. Need to get lost in the steely, cold, brutal spark there. In the monstrousness they barely hide. The darkness they exude.

The chains they keep me in.

Our bodies slam together, the concrete scraping my back and the fingers around my throat squeezing so hard my vision blurs. It's all of it—the merciless way he's taking me, the rough words, the violence, the savagery.

It consumes me, a flaming pyre reducing me to ash and bone.

"Yes, try and hold back, slut," he snarls, kissing me harshly and biting my lip until copper floods my tongue, making me cry out. "Pretend your little virgin pussy isn't about to come all over my big, fat cock. Pretend you're not turned on by your blood and sticky wetness coating my dick and dripping from my balls. Tell yourself you're a good girl. Tell yourself that good girls don't come on their backs in the dirt with their ripped panties hanging from their knees and my fucking marks all over their necks so that all the world sees *how fucking mine you are*."

I moan as his mouth dips to my neck again, biting and sucking at the marks there and sending a head-swimming mix of pain and arousal exploding through my core.

"*I don't give a fuck if you come or not, slut,*" he snarls in my ear.

My walls clamp down around him. My core turns into a ball of white-hot heat as my reality shreds.

"*You're just a fucking hole for me*," he rasps. "A pretty little fuck-hole cumslut for me to use. So come, or don't. Either way, I'm going to empty my fucking balls into this messy little cunt right the fuck now."

I'm officially fucked in the head. Because all of this is *everything* I crave.

Mal's lips crush to mine, sinking his teeth into my bottom one and sending a fresh flood of copper over our tongues. His cock rams deep, and when he bites down again, I lose all control.

My entire body spasms and jerks off the ground, arching against him as I *scream* into his mouth with an unhinged wildness that takes my breath away. The orgasm explodes through me like a firestorm, destroying every inch of me as I dig my nails into his chest and wrap my legs tight around his hips.

Mal grunts, burying his thick cock deep inside me as I feel him spasm and throb. I moan when I feel the hot flood of his cum spill into me—unprotected, uncovered. Bare.

It sends another orgasm crashing over me, wave after wave, until I'm shaking and fading out of reality.

I whimper pathetically when he pulls away, slipping his cock out of my tender pussy with a mortifying, squelching sound. His body leaves mine. So does his heat.

My eyes clench shut. I'm not ready to let go yet. I'm not ready to go back to the vicious man who looks at me like he hates me. Who *does* hate me, for the blood in my veins.

My eyes fly open, a moan choking from my swollen, bleeding lips as I feel a warm wetness drag up my tender pussy. I stare down between my lewdly spread legs as Mal grabs my thighs and shoves them wider apart. He dips his head again, his eyes locked on mine as he tongues my pussy with a tenderness that shocks me.

It doesn’t last. The gentleness escalates to a core-clenching insanity as he begins to devour me. He growls into me, his whole mouth pressed to my pussy as his tongue slides deep inside. I moan, trembling as my legs shake and my core tightens. My eyes roll back, my breath hitching as Mal shoves me right back to the edge.

His tongue wraps around my swollen clit, and instantly, I’m shattering all over again.

I cry out hoarsely into the cold night air as my hips rise, my orgasm exploding through me. Mal doesn’t move, licking and sucking at my aching pussy until I’m sure I’m going to pass out.

It’s only then that he raises his head. I’m shaking all over as I force my eyes open, my gaze drifting down my scratched, bruised body until I lock eyes with him.

Holy fucking God.

His eyes gleam with a madness that steals my breath. His lips glisten with a mix of cum and blood. And before I know it, he’s sliding up over me, covering me with his body as his hand wraps around my throat again.

His lips crush to mine, and I taste it.

All of it.

All of us.

It tastes like beautiful insanity.

He pulls back slightly, his breath still ragged, and his eyes meet mine—dark, intense, but with a flicker of something softer hidden deep beneath the surface now.

We stand and survey the carnage. My underwear is gone, my dress destroyed. Still, I salvage what I can, tugging the one intact strap up, trying to cover myself. It’s hopeless: the front is shredded and ripped away, baring my breasts.

Without a word, Mal yanks off his shirt. He pulls it over my head, tugging the massive t-shirt down over me, the hem almost long enough to be a

minidress on me.

Wordlessly, he suddenly scoops me into his arms. Bare-chested, he turns and carries me out of the construction site, back to the hallway with the flickering lights.

The finance douchebags are *still* there, half a block away. One of them whistles and says something like “Where’s your clothes?” to Mal. When he turns and shoots them a cold, icy stare, the whole group flinches and quickly leaves.

He carries me all the way back to my hotel. An extremely confused-looking night manager stares at us as Mal carries me through the lobby and upstairs to the second-floor lounge and visitor center. There’s a little kiosk to one side that sells t-shirts and hoodies with the Montreal skyline on them. There’s not a soul in sight, and Mal calmly swipes two of them before he carries me to the elevator and pushes the button for my floor.

I don’t ask how he knows that.

I don’t ask how he knew I was here at *all*.

I think the answer might scare me. And besides, I’m not sure I can even speak or think clearly right now.

At the door to my hotel room, Mal finally sets me down. He hands me one of the hoodies as he pulls the other one over his head. Then his hands go to either side of me, against the door, caging me, piercing my eyes with his.

Without warning, his mouth slams to mine. I wince at how tender my lips are, feeling the last of my strength leave my body as my legs sag. But I hear myself whimper for more before he pulls away.

“You’re mine,” he murmurs, his voice rough but steady. “My good girl.”

Something vicious and hot throbs deep inside me. I feel myself trembling, my body leaning closer to him, as if I have this need to be nearer to him—this odd, alien desire to be touching him, kissing him, curled up inside him.

I mean, what the fuck is this, some hormonal thing that comes after you have sex for the first time?

I can’t stop myself as I draw closer to him, my hands reaching out to grab small handfuls of his hoodie as I lean up, desperate to kiss him.

“*I’ll be good for you*.”

Something dark flashes in his eyes. For a second, it feels like it did right before he rammed into me—that same dark flicker of hungry need.

Except this is…different, somehow. It’s not hunger or need I see when his jaw clenches. It’s not “dark desire” that I see in his face when he suddenly steps back, as if burned.

He blinks, his throat bobbing heavily.

And then, without another word, he turns and walks away, disappearing around the corner of the hotel hallway.

Okayyy?

I could wonder what the fuck that last part was. Or I could admit that it’s *Mal* we’re talking about, so… Who the hell knows.

All I know is, my body aches, and even though my mind is a whirlwind of emotions I don’t fully understand, in this moment I know one thing for certain.

“*You’re mine*.”

He’s right.

And there’s no going back now.

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18

MAL

It's ten in the morning by the time I find myself standing on the roof of my loft building, staring out over the city.

The air is crisp, the sun is out. I barely notice.

…Not just because I'm fucking exhausted, either.

I take another long pull from the coffee cup in my hand. I set it down on the railing and run my hands over my face, rubbing the grit from my eyes.

If I keep up these games with Freya, my sleep patterns are going to be *fucked*.

I've dug deeper into her now. It's not just that Freya is a night owl leaning into the whole goth thing way too hard. She's got a real—albeit, rare—condition that makes sunlight literally toxic to her.

Her defiant refusal to come over the other time makes sense now.

I frown as I take another sip of coffee.

Yes, I looked into her more. Not just to find out how she's connected to any of the bad shit from my past. I already know all that.

But because she's under my skin now, more than I care to admit. There've been glimmers of that since before last night. But *after* I floored it up to Montreal to chase her and *fuck her*, she's been in my head constantly, an echo I can't shake.

Digging into her, I might add, also entailed smiling darkly as I peered at her web history, scrolling through the filthy, deviant, hardcore shit she likes to read and watch.

Bad girl.

I stand on the roof, staring out at the world below, but all I can see is her face. Her body. The way she looked at me as I left her. The way her lips parted, her breath hitched…

Fuck.

I was her first time.

At *twenty-six.*

I could wonder how it is that a woman with her looks and her particularly dark kinks got to that age without *ever* having been fucked before.

But I don't have to.

I can read between the lines of "edgy kinks" and "hasn't indulged in physical contact" better than most and see the writing on the wall.

There's darkness in her past.

Someone hurt her.

Damaged, it would appear, recognizes damaged.

Freya's whispered words outside her hotel room ram into my brain again.

I'll be good.

It was a simple phrase, innocent enough. But it sliced into me like a knife to the gut. The *way* she said it—soft, submissive, like she'd folded herself into something fragile—triggered something dark inside me I thought I'd buried long ago. A part of me I thought I'd locked away.

She pulled me back to a place I've tried to forget. To a time when those same words were my lifeline, my plea for mercy.

I'll be good.

I close my eyes as the memory of those dark years spent in a prison of my grandfather’s making claws its way unbidden to the surface and the past threatens to drown me.

Those were black times. They came after the night of blood and terror at my home, when my family was killed by flame and bullets as I hid in the deep end of the pool, breathing smoky air through a garden hose.

The night I saw Kir prowling the perimeter of the carnage after I finally came up from the depths.

After that night, I went to live with my grandfather, Kasper.

Most people’s memories of their grandfathers involve a warm smile, a rocking chair, maybe a woodworking hobby, or fishing.

Mine taste like poison.

My grandfather was a Nazi sympathizer, a bitter, vicious, devil of a monster. It wasn’t just me at his country home deep in the Norwegian woods on the edge of the lake. There were two other boys already living there when I arrived: Jonas and Filip.

Like me, they were without family, from broken, blackened pasts. But Kasper didn’t take us in out of kindness.

He did it out of cruelty and sadism, because of some fucked-up, Nazi-influenced idea that he wanted to mold us into “true Aryans”.

Those years, filled with Kasper repeatedly beating his hateful, malicious doctrine into us, were hell. They were bloody and terrifying.

Of the three of us, I was the one in the middle. I could weather Kasper’s malevolence and his cruelty, but I never once bought into his twisted world view and poisonous rhetoric.

Jonas went another way. An orphan from the streets of Oslo, he too could withstand Kasper’s cruelty. But where I held my ground against his brainwashing, Jonas dove in headfirst. He was Kasper’s favorite. His prize student. His perfect little hate-filled Nazi pet.

And then there was Filip.

Filip, with the kind heart and broken smile. Filip, who just wanted someone he could call family.

He never stood a chance.

I'll be good.

I flinch, remembering Filip saying those words to Kasper over and over, desperate to make the beatings stop, praying that this time, this *one* time, Kasper would be satisfied.

He never was. Not with Filip, nor with me.

I'm not that boy anymore. But Freya's words—her submission—pulled something out of me that I haven't felt in years. It made me feel like that helpless, broken kid all over again, and I hated it.

I left after she said it, slipped away into the night without a word, not because I wanted to, but because I *needed* to. I needed distance, space to breathe and to get my head on straight. But even now, hours later, the sound of her voice still lingers, a ghost in my mind. It pulls at something raw inside me, something that should've damn well stayed buried.

I'll be good.

I clench my fists tightly.

She makes me feel like I'm losing control.

I've spent years building walls, fortifying myself against the world. She's removing the bricks one by one. And I can't afford that.

I force myself to turn away from the balcony and shake off the thoughts of Freya. Tonight isn't about her. Tonight is about Kenzo and Annika's wedding.

THE CHURCH IS FILLED with Yakuza and Bratva soldiers. This should be—okay, *is*—a powder-keg ready to blow, but that's the whole reason we're

here: to bury the bloodshed. To stop the spiraling chaos before the whole city turns into war zone.

The knives might be put away, but the tension in the air is palpable, as if everyone here knows that this peace is a fragile, easily shattered illusion.

I frown, rubbing my eyes. I still haven't managed to sleep. Earlier, chaos erupted on both sides of this supposed truce when no one could find Hana, Annika, or Freya after the bachelorette party.

I, of course, knew precisely where they were.

But I couldn't exactly say anything. I couldn't reveal that I'd tracked Freya all the way to fucking Montreal by hacking into her various social accounts and IP-tracing her.

In a fucked-up way, today was slightly amusing, watching everyone scramble, trying to track down the bride and her friends. But twenty minutes ago, the three of them showed up looking bedraggled and hungover as shit in an Uber all the way from Canada.

I may have taken a particularly smug satisfaction in noticing the vicious purple marks all over Freya's neck.

My marks.

I stand at the front, watching Annika make her way down the aisle toward Kenzo, escorted by that fuckhead Kir. Kenzo waits at the altar, stoic as ever, his expression unreadable to most.

I, however, can read my cousin like a book.

It's been like that since I was eleven and escaped the hell I'd lived in with my grandfather. That's when I came to live with my aunt Astrid and my three cousins, Kenzo, Takeshi, and Hana. Tak and Hana are quite a few years younger than Kenzo. So when I showed up, almost his age, we became thick as thieves.

To me, his feelings are clear: he hates that he's being forced into this arranged marriage. At the same time, Kenzo's been the male head of this family since he was a boy. "Family duty" is something he lives and

breathes. So even if this isn't what he'd have chosen for himself, he's going to do it, because that's just who he is.

When Annika stops in front of him, it's just the two of them and the priest up there. No best man, no maid of honor.

My eyes slide to the side, across the aisle, and my jaw tightens.

Freya is standing beside Kir in the front row, wearing a sleek black dress that hugs her body in all the right places. Her dark hair catches the soft glow of the chandeliers, her expression unreadable.

I let my gaze *feast* on the marks on her neck that the gallon of concealer is trying valiantly to cover.

Dark, sultry flashbacks hit me like a fist to the gut. Last night. The feel of her body against mine. Her gasps. Her submission.

The way she broke so beautifully for me.

I try to focus on the ceremony, but my eyes keep drifting back to her. I shouldn't be so fixated. She's *mine*, yes, but this feels…different. Personal. That's dangerous.

The ceremony proceeds as expected. The vows are spoken, Kenzo and Annika exchange rings. But there's a strange energy in the air, something I can't quite pinpoint. My instincts are prickling, warning me that something's about to go wrong. I scan the crowd, my hand inching toward the gun tucked into my jacket. I can feel the tension building every second.

Kenzo and Annika say I do. Then—shockingly, given that I genuinely thought the two of them couldn't *stand* each other—my cousin grabs his new bride, cups her face, and kisses her with an intensity that makes her melt against him.

I can't help but smirk.

Fuck me. Maybe *that* was the premonition that I felt tingling at the back of my neck. Not impending danger, just my cousin deciding to go *totally* off script and actually show some affection toward his enemy-turned-arranged-bride.

“*Shit*,” Hana mutters, clapping along with everyone else and shaking her head as she shoots a look my way. “Who the hell had *that* on their fake wedding bingo card?”

Next to her, Tak snorts. “I don’t know what the fuck his angle is there, but—”

“C’mon,” Hana sighs. “Maybe his *angle* is that he wants to kiss his new bride?”

“Those two *do not* want to be kissing each other, trust me,” Tak snickers. “One of them is fucking with the other one right now, I’m just curious why—”

I whirl, every sense jangling as the front doors of the church slam inward and splinter into a thousand pieces.

A van comes crashing through them, careening down the center aisle. The congregation erupts into chaos, screaming, scattering in every direction as it screeches to a halt in the middle of the church.

My body reacts before my mind can catch up. My gun is in my hand, and I’m moving toward the van even as I glance over my shoulder to roar at Tak to get Sota and Hana the fuck out of here. But Sota’s men are already on that, and Takeshi is right behind me, his own gun raised.

“Stay back,” I hiss at him as screaming fills the church, along with the dust and debris from the crash. Then my head yanks around the other way, my gaze lasering through the dust and debris-filled air.

To Freya.

My heart lurches in my chest when I see her frozen in the crowd, her face pale with shock. All I can think about is making sure she’s okay. I can’t explain it or rationalize it, I just *need* to know that she’s safe.

I tear my gaze from her, focusing on the van as I approach slowly. There’s no movement inside, but I keep my gun trained on the driver’s side door as I creep closer.

Dust still chokes the air. People are still screaming in the background as guards from both sides bark orders and load guns.

But I'm utterly focused on the door as I make my way closer, every step taking an eternity, the tension building with each second.

"Out of the van!" I roar. "Now!"

There's no response. I move closer.

"*Out*!!"

Still nothing.

Yeah, fuck this. I charge the rest of the way to the door, grit my teeth, take a dust-filled breath, then grab the handle and yank it open before jamming the barrel of my gun inside.

It's empty.

No driver. No passenger. Nobody in the back.

What the fuck?

I frown as I turn away, my eyes catching Kenzo's where he's standing at the altar, his body shielding Annika.

"It's empty!" I yell at him.

He frowns. Then, in slow motion, everything changes.

Kenzo's confused expression suddenly morphs into one of pure panic. His eyes widen as his face pales.

"GET BACK!!" he roars, jumping down from the chancel and bolting toward me. "MAL! GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM—"

Oh fuck.

Move.

Just as I lunge away, the van beside me suddenly morphs into orange, bubbly liquid. I don't think. I just whirl, tackle Takeshi, and slam him

behind an empty pew just as the whole fucking van detonates with the force of the sun.

It feels like getting hit by a freight train at top speed.

The impact of the blast shatters and splinters the pew Tak and I are crouching behind, punching into me hard enough to lift me off my feet and send me flying backward as the air is sucked from my lungs.

For a moment, the world is still and quiet except for a high, whining sound ringing in my ears—but muffled, as if coming through cotton balls.

I blink, choking gray dust from my cracked lips as I raise my head, only then realizing that I'm on the ground.

Holy. Fuck.

Dust and debris fill the air, choking the church with smoke. I can vaguely hear screams and people scrambling for cover, but it all sounds distant, muffled by the ringing in my ears.

For a moment, my vision swims, my mind struggling to catch up with the chaos around me. But then, through the haze of smoke, I force myself to sit up, my gun still held tightly in my hand.

The van is engulfed in flames, the heat scorching the air around it. Smoke billows out in thick, black plumes, and I can hear the crackling of flames as they consume the wreckage. I push to my feet, ignoring the pain in my side as I scan the room for any sign of the attackers. Tak crawls out from under a shattered pew, flashing me a thumbs up sign as he coughs violently.

All I can think about is Freya.

I can't see her through the smoke.

I need to find her.

Takeshi is suddenly at my side, grabbing my arm, trying to pull me toward the exit. "Come on!" he barks into my ear. "We gotta go!"

I shove him off, my eyes still scanning the room. I won't leave until I see her. Until I know she's safe.

Then, through the smoke, I spot her through an open side door—crouched behind a car outside, Kir and his men forming a protective circle around her. Her face is pale, her eyes wide with shock and horror.

But she's alive.

I'm not sure how to process the feeling of relief that floods through me.

I shouldn't care this much. I shouldn't feel this need to protect her, to make sure she's okay, but I do. And it's pissing me off.

"*Mal*!" Tak roars. "Let's fucking *go*!"

I nod, grimacing as he helps me to my feet and out the side door. Hana rushes over to me from where she's been standing with Sota and his men. She hugs me fiercely, sobbing into my chest as I wrap a bloodied arm around her.

"All good, sis," I grunt. "All in one piece."

She pulls back and winces when she looks up at me. "Fuck, Mal, you're bleeding."

I frown, bringing a hand up to touch my temple. It comes away red and wet.

Oh.

"I'm fine," I say. "I'll get it checked out."

Hana still wants to fuss over me, but I've got other things to worry about besides a cut on my head.

Kenzo and Annika are both unharmed, though Kenzo looks dazed and slightly fire-blackened. Sota is okay, too, and I grin when the tough old bastard tells me that in his day car bombs "were a lot more effective".

I glance around the flaming wreckage as approaching sirens wail in the distance.

Whoever was behind this knew exactly what they were doing. This wasn't just an attack—it was a message.

My head instinctively whips around to look at Freya. She's still with Kir, joined now by Annika. She's hugging her friend, shaken and terrified, but when she looks over Annika's shoulder and sees me, she stiffens. I watch her marked, bruised throat bob as she swallows. I watch that furtive fire flicker in her eyes as they lock with mine.

Yeah, this was a message all right.

Someone tried to hurt what's *mine*.

And may God have mercy on their souls when I find out who they are.

Because *I* sure as fuck won't.

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19

FREYA

KIR'S VOICE fills the library, his low, sharp commands cutting through the silence. I sit curled up in a high-backed chair, a glass of whiskey in my hand, the burn of the alcohol grounding me as I try to make sense of it all. The swift, brutal attack at the church was a sharp reminder of the danger lurking in the shadows of our world.

Across from me, Kir paces, his phone to his ear, his expression cold. His words are clipped, his tone businesslike as he barks orders to whomever is on the other end of the line, switching between English and Russian.

This is the Kir that most people see—the Bratva kingpin who's always in control and one step ahead. But I know better. Underneath that cold, calculating exterior is a man who would cut his own heart out for those he considers family.

It's a comforting feeling I've come to rely on, one that's brought me out of some pretty dark places since I've *become* one of those people he considers family. When the rest of the world goes black and cold, I've always known Kir will be there for me.

I take another sip of whiskey, letting the warmth of it spread through my chest. I set the glass down and glance at my laptop. My fingers fly over the keys as I dig through various online databases I've found on the dark web, trying to find any shred of information about the attackers.

So far, there's nothing. Nada. Zero. Zilch.

Whoever orchestrated this was meticulously careful. Which only makes me more determined to uncover the truth.

Mercifully, no one died today. But that doesn't mean we all emerged unscathed. Lev, one of Kir's men, is in the hospital with a piece of the van that exploded still embedded in his stomach. There are also four other Nikolayev men who took shrapnel and will need time to recover.

A soft ping interrupts my focus, and I glance down to see that Anni's replied to my first text. While I'm here on lockdown with Kir at his mansion, she's at her new husband's penthouse—at Kenzo's insistence, actually.

ME

You're SURE you're good there??

ANNIKA

Yeah. Tons of security. There are five of Kenzo's guys watching the lobby, plus three of Kir's.

Thank *fuck*.

ANNIKA

Are you okay?

ME

I'm good. Kinda shaken. Like WTF

ME

U thinking Kenzo's enemies or ours?

With so much Yakuza and Bratva power in one place, in hindsight, it would almost be more shocking if someone *didn't* try and use the wedding as an opportunity to attack—if they were suicidal or stupid enough to try it.

ANNIKA

No idea, honestly. It DOES seem more like a Bratva move than a Yakuza one.

She's not wrong. It's the Russians who are fans of direct, explosive attacks. The Yakuza is subtler. Like, if this was them, I'd expect the wedding cake to be poisoned or something.

ANNIKA

Kir sent guys to watch over Damian, right?

ME

As if that wasn't my first thought?

ME

Or Kir's?

Our quasi-brother just underwent his final surgery before the wedding, and it's been a success. But the doctors are going to keep him in that coma for another few days just to be sure.

I get where Annika's worry is coming from. Normally, Damian's a strong, gym-addicted, cocky, trigger-happy tough guy. But while he's weakened and lying unconscious in a hospital bed? He's the perfect target for someone wanting to hurt Kir.

ANNIKA

Sorry, just freaked out

ME

I know. Same. I'm just giving you hard time. Yeah, there's like ten guys at the hospital right now.

Kir ends his call with a curt command and tosses the phone onto the table, rubbing his temples as he sinks into the chair across from me. He looks uncharacteristically tired. It appears even he isn't immune to the pressure.

ME

I gotta go. I'm helping Kir on recon. Check in later?

ANNIKA

For sure. Love ya, stay safe.

ME

Have fun on your speeeeeciiaal first niiiightt…. ;)

ANNIKA

I hate you.

I grin as I close the messaging app.

"Any luck?" Kir asks, his eyes flicking to my laptop.

I shake my head. "Nothing yet. Whoever did this covered their fucking tracks well."

He sighs, his expression darkening. “All right. Keep at it if you can. I want to find these fucks and string them up by the balls.”

“Or ovaries.”

He gives me a look. I shrug.

“It could have been women.”

“*Women* would be smart enough not to attack my daughter’s wedding.”

I laugh. “Touché.”

“We’ll find them, Frey,” he growls. “I promise.”

Yeah. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from Kir over the years, it’s that he doesn’t give up. Ever. It’s one of the reasons I’ve always respected him so much—he’s relentless, just like me. That’s why we work so well together.

I lean back in my chair, taking another sip of whiskey, trying to focus on the task at hand. I glance up as the door to the library creaks open, and Mia, one of the newer household staff, steps inside. She’s carrying a fresh drink for Kir, her eyes wide and nervous as she approaches him.

But there’s a boldness in her gaze too that makes me want to roll my eyes. I also don’t miss that her makeup is freshly touched up, the skirt of her maid’s uniform hiked up a *little* higher than usual, or that the top button of said uniform is open, showing a hefty amount of cleavage and a glimpse of black lace bra.

Ugh, not even anything tasteful. It’s like sale bin Victoria’s Secret.

Up your game, girl.

She sets the drink down in front of Kir, her hand lingering a little too long on the glass, her voice soft and sugary as she murmurs, “Anything else I can get for you, *sir*?”

Kir doesn’t even look up. “That’ll be all, Mia.”

There’s no angry edge to his voice, but the dismissal is clear. He’s not interested. He never is. But Mia, like so many before her, just doesn’t get

the hint. Her smile falters only for a second before she composes herself and clears her throat.

“Well, I’m available *all* evening, if there’s *anything* that you need, *sir*—”

“I said that’ll be all, Mia.”

There’s a finality in his tone now that shuts the whole thing down. Mia’s face darkens and she nods curtly as she turns and quickly clicks out of the room on ridiculously high heels.

I wait until the door shuts before I glance at Kir, smirking. “You’d think she’d get the hint by now.”

Kir finally looks up, a faint smile on his lips. “She’ll be gone by morning. Promise.”

I chuckle. “Oh, don’t fire her on my account.”

“I’m not. I’m firing her on *mine*.” He sighs. “I don’t need that shit around the house.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know why they bother.”

“They see power and think they can charm their way into it,” Kir shrugs, lifting his drink to his lips. “But power comes from control, not being distracted.”

I nod, completely understanding. Kir and I are cut from the same cloth. We don’t *get* distracted. We don’t let emotions or petty desires cloud our judgment. That’s another reason we’ve always worked so well together. We see the bigger picture.

“Have you contacted The Broker yet?” Kir asks, his sharp gaze drifting back to my laptop.

I bite back a grimace. The Broker is the black market, underworld go-between that set Annika and I up with the job with Ulkan Gacaferi to steal the yellow Lambo, which unfortunately got us back on that monster Valon Leka’s radar in the process.

Kir, however, knows none of this, because we haven't *told him* about the Lambo job.

"Not yet," I say quickly. "But I will."

Kir watches me for a moment, his expression softening in that way it only does when he's around me or Annika. "We'll figure this all out out, Freya. We always do."

I give him a small smile, the weight of his trust settling over me like a warm blanket. "Yeah. We will."

A few hours later, with dawn approaching and my eyes blurry from staring at my laptop for too long, I finally take a break. Kir's asleep on the office couch when I toss a blanket over him and retreat to my room, the events of the day weighing heavily on me.

It's been an *insane* twenty-four hours.

Dinner and karaoke…a high-speed car chase in a stolen vehicle…a trip across an international border…acting out a *seriously* fucked-up kink with Mal and losing my fucking virginity to him…and then to top it all off a car bombing at Annika's wedding?

I mean, a pause button would be nice.

Exhaustion washes through me, worse because I didn't get any of my usual daytime sleep today. But my mind is too restless to allow me any peace. Too many thoughts are swirling, too many emotions are tangled up inside me.

Mal.

I close the door behind me, letting out a long, shaky breath. My fingers brush over my neck, where the purple bruises from his touch still linger.

A reminder of the hold he has on me, even when he's not here.

I shouldn't want him. I shouldn't want *this*. I shouldn't crave him the way I do.

Mal is a monster—dark, dangerous, twisted in ways that should, and do, terrify me. But that fear is mixed with something else. I can't explain it, can't make sense of the way my body responds to him, the way my mind fixates on him. I'm supposed to hate him.

I move to the window, staring out into the darkness. The city is quiet tonight, the distant hum of traffic barely audible through the thick glass, but the stillness does nothing to calm me.

I find myself wondering where Mal is now. Is he thinking about me? Does he regret leaving so abruptly last night?

Then I groan and almost slap myself.

Grow up.

This isn't high school. We're two adults who engaged in a little adult fun, that's all. And I *refuse* to be "that girl" who gets all emo about a guy.

I mean, like hell is *he* feeling anything close to that. Mal doesn't have regrets. He doesn't do guilt, or even emotions—at least, I seriously doubt he does.

And yet, despite everything, I can't help but want him here with me.

It's fucking maddening.

And the worst part?

I don't think I want that to stop.

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FREYA

THE NEXT EVENING, I'm back in the sterile, fluorescent-lit hallway of the hospital. The sharp, overwhelming smell of antiseptic hangs heavy in the air, but I've grown used to it by now. When you've been in them as much as I have, hospitals have a way of becoming familiar no matter how much you hate them.

Delores beams at me when I walk over to the nurses' station. Before she can say a word, I'm marching behind the counter and into her space and flinging my arms around her.

"*Thank you*," I blurt as I hug her tightly. "*Thank you, thank you, thank you*."

Sometimes, karma has a way of balancing things out. Amid the shitshow of the last twenty-four hours and everything that happened at the wedding, something good actually happened:

Damian woke up.

Delores hugs me back, rocking me side to side as I fight back the urge to cry into her shoulder.

"*Told you* he was a fighter," she says quietly, smiling as we pull apart. "That was all him, honey."

I throw her a look. "Hey, you're the one who took care of him and kept him comfortable, so he could focus on getting better. I brought you something."

I sling my bag off my back and pull out a wrapped present. Delores' brows arch as she takes it. "Can I open it now?"

"Please do."

She almost loses her *shit* when she unwraps the vinyl copy of Fleetwood Mac's *Tusk* album, autographed by Lindsey Buckingham.

"Is this real?!" she blurts, staring at the scrawled signature.

"*Yup,*" I grin. I nod my chin at a rusty stain next to the autograph. "And that, allegedly, at least according to the guy I got it from, is a bloodstain from Stevie Nicks' nose after one too many lines of coke."

Delores screeches as she hugs me tight again. "*Thank you,* hon." She pulls back, and her brow arches again as she eyes me.

"What?"

She smiles curiously. "You look…different. I mean…" She shakes her head. "It's like a vibe about you."

I feel my cheeks flush. "I'm sure it's nothing."

She chuckles. "My mistake. You go off and see that handsome brother of yours."

"Thanks, Delores."

I start to head down the hall.

"Hey—Freya?"

I turn back to her. She's got a shit-eating grin on her face.

"By 'vibe', I meant 'giant fucking hickey on your neck'. Just an FYI."

Heat explodes across my face and my hand jerks up to the bruising on my neck I've *tried* to cover with concealer. Fuck.

Delores chuckles. "Unless you got into a fight with a chain, I'd *love* to hear about your hot date." She nods her chin past me. "Your brother might not, though…"

"YOU LOOK LIKE SHIT," Damian croaks, his voice scratchy but still laced with that teasing edge I know and love.

I roll my eyes, moving closer. "Thanks. You look like a corpse."

He's sitting up in bed, no longer with all the unnerving feeding and breathing tubes snaking out of his mouth. His supernaturally white hair catches the light, making him look almost otherworldly, like a ghost.

His eerie, purplish eyes lock on mine. With Anni and I, they're always filled with smiles and charm.

With most other people, they're filled with pure darkness.

He chuckles, the sound a little strained but genuine. "Still better looking than most, I'd say."

I roll my eyes. "I see weeks of hovering near death have done nothing to diminish your ego."

"Mercifully, not my dick either. I checked."

I make a puking face and gag.

"Oh my God, could you *not*?"

Damian grins widely as I slap his arm.

Despite the humor in his words, there's an undercurrent of darkness in him lurking just beneath the surface. It's always there, a part of him that he can't hide, no matter how hard he tries. But he walks that tightrope between charm and danger perfectly, somehow balancing the two with ease.

"Hey, don't hit me," he grunts. "The whole 'near-death' thing, in case you've forgotten already?"

"Yeah, well, you're *not* dead, which is kind of an inconvenience for pretty much everyone else, including me."

Damian flips me off. I do the same right back.

Then he smirks at me. “You’re lucky I’m too weak to strangle you.”

I chuckle, but the warmth of the moment fades quickly. The weight of everything that’s happened—the wedding attack, the uncertainty of what comes next—presses down on us, casting a pall over our conversation. To make things worse, we just heard that Annika is going to be flying back to Japan with Kenzo. He’s pulling out of New York in the wake of all the violence, not to mention uncertainty about who the enemy even is.

On the plus side, it means my best friend is going to be *utterly* safe. Kenzo commands an army back in Kyoto, and lives in a fortress-like mansion. And even though this marriage is just one giant peace treaty, and he and Annika don’t even like each other very much, I know Kenzo is old-school when it comes to certain things. Like marriage.

Even if he and Annika can’t stand each other…although I have questions about that kiss at the altar…she’s his *wife* now. And I know he’ll protect her with everything he has for that reason alone.

Still. My best friend, my sister, my shadow, is leaving me.

Damian picks up on my subtle mood dip. He’s good like that.

“You’re thinking about Anni leaving.”

I nod.

“I just can’t believe *she got fucking married*,” he sighs. “And that I was in a coma so I couldn’t say ‘yeah, me, right here,’ when they asked if anyone present objected.”

I snort. “Actually, I don’t think they asked that at all.”

“Sounds like collusion to me.”

I roll my eyes. “She’s in good hands.”

“Kenzo Mori is a fucking snake. The whole family is.”

I shrug. “They’re not *all* bad.”

“Meaning?” Damian growls.

I quickly shove any thoughts of Mal down.

“Hey, Hana is cool. Anni and I have been hanging out with her.”

“Who, the bleach-blonde robot ice queen?”

I glare at him. “She’s a friend.”

“You’re pronouncing *enemy* wrong.”

I sigh, patting his arm. “You’re a little behind on this season’s episodes, what with the coma and all. I think you’ve got some binge watching to do.”

“I think I like that idea about as much as I like those fucking marks on you,” he growls, his sharp, venomous eyes scanning me, his gaze lingering on my neck.

Where Mal *mauled* me.

I instinctively reach up to touch my throat, trying to cover the bruises. Damian’s expression hardens.

“Who did that to you?” he asks, his voice suddenly cold, all traces of joking gone.

I stiffen, my heart hammering in my chest. “No one,” I shrug.

Damian’s gaze doesn’t waver. “Freya. Don’t fucking lie to me. If someone’s hurting you—”

“No one’s hurting me,” I interrupt, my voice steadier than I feel. “I’m fine. Seriously.”

He sits back, his expression unreadable as he studies me. “Are you *seeing* someone?”

I shake my head…maybe a bit too quickly.

“*Whaaat*?” I drawl casually, waving a hand. “No. Definitely not.”

Damian doesn’t push it, but his eyes remain sharp, the tension between us palpable. He knows me well enough to guess when I’m hiding something,

but he also knows when not to press. So he just lets out a soft sigh, his fingers twisting the bed sheets.

“Just be careful,” he says quietly, his voice barely above a hoarse whisper. “This world will eat you alive if you let it.”

I nod, my throat tight as I reach out to give his hand a light squeeze. “I know. Good thing I’ve got you back now.”

LATER THAT NIGHT, the hospital looming behind us, I stand with Annika by the car that will take her to Sota Akiyama’s private plane. The air is cool, biting against my skin, and the weight of the moment presses down on my chest like a boulder.

“I’ll be back soon,” Annika says, pulling me into a big bearhug. “I promise.”

I hold her close, my throat tight with unshed tears. “You’d better. If you don’t, I’ll come to Kyoto and cause *so* much trouble.”

She laughs, trying to hide her other, less happy, emotions. “You promise?”

“We’d burn that place down, bitch,” I grin. “So you’d better come back soon.”

She bites her lip as her eyes lock with mine. “You’re my family, Frey.”

“You have Kenzo now, too,” I remind her softly, though the words taste bitter as they leave my mouth.

Annika wipes her eyes, a sad smile pulling at her lips. “I’ll visit. I’ll make sure of it. Or else I’ll just fly you out and keep you there.”

I nod, hugging her tightly. Then it’s time to go.

I’m unable to speak as I watch her climb into the car. As it pulls away, that hollow ache in me deepens, settling into my bones like a chill I can’t shake.

For the first time in ages, I feel completely alone.

Hours later, back at Kir's mansion, I sit alone in my room, staring at my phone.

I *hate* that I'm even contemplating texting him. I *refuse* to be that emotionally needy chick who pathetically calls and texts and pines over the guy she screwed, even if it was her first time.

So I bring up my convo with Annika and text her instead.

ME

Any good inflight movies?

ANNIKA

Dude this plane is INSAAAANE. It's not a jet. It's a fucking 747.

My brows shoot up. Holy *shit*.

ANNIKA

Forget inflight movies. I just had sushi and sake with Sota at the freaking sushi bar on this bitch!

ME

Goddammit. Pair me with peanut butter and call me jelly.

ANNIKA

LOL

ME

:(:(:(

ANNIKA

I wish you were here. It'd be so much cooler

ME

Well obviously. But at least you've got Hana, right? Go get up to some serious shit with her, please. For me.

ANNIKA

Lol, deal. I'll try and pry her away from the gang.

I frown.

ME

Gang?

ANNIKA

I just mean the Mori family. Kenzo, Tak, Mal.

It hits me like a punch in the stomach.

Mal's on his way to freaking *Kyoto*.

He left to go to the other side of the fucking planet and didn't say a thing. Didn't even hint that he was leaving. Now he's just…gone.

I stare at the text, my thoughts spiraling as the reality of his departure sinks in. He's gone. Just like that. Without a word, without a goodbye—

Oh fuck off, self.

I should be *pleased*. If he's gone, it means the sick arrangement we had is over, or, at least, on pause. I should feel freer, lighter, knowing that Mal's possessive grip on me has been loosened.

Instead, I feel hollow.

Used.

Like he shattered my world and then disappeared, leaving me to pick up the pieces on my own.

I toss my phone aside, staring out the window into the darkness. I wrap my arms around myself, feeling the cold emptiness settle deeper into my bones.

Mal is gone. I should be relieved.

So why the fuck aren't I?

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FREYA

I STARE OUT THE WINDOW, my breath stuck in my throat, my pulse skipping like a record scratch. Annika's words still echo in my ears, sharp and jarring in the hollow quiet of the room.

We got Kenzo back. Ulkan Gacaferi is dead. It's over.

The air I exhale feels thick and heavy, like I'm purging poison from my lungs. A chain that's been wrapped around my neck for weeks feels like it's loosening, falling away. The tension that's had me by the throat, the fear and anxiety I've carried like an anchor—it's all disappearing.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I can breathe again.

I stare into the middle distance, my mind blank and full at the same time, trying to process it all.

Ulkan is dead.

I want to scream with relief, but I can't even find the energy to move. It's over—finally over.

I know the world's been spinning for weeks around Annika's forced marriage to Kenzo to broker a fragile peace between Bratva and Yakuza. But underneath that, dragging us both down like the deadliest of weights, has been the mess we created the night Anni and I stupidly stole that Lamborghini.

Agreeing to take that job for Ulkan was a monumentally bad decision. It put our relationship with Kir in jeopardy and broke every promise we made to him about staying out of petty shit like that.

Worse, it got us back on Valon Leka's radar, after Annika had escaped him all those years ago.

But now, all that tension and weight are finally lifting.

It's been days—six, to be exact—since Annika flew to Kyoto. It's been just as long since I spoke with Mal.

Not that I'm counting.

Not one call or text to let me know he was done with me, and our unholy arrangement was over. Well, I don't know if it *is* over. But I feel like there is—or at least *should be*—some sort of implied expiration date given that he's dropped off the face of the Earth.

But that all gets brushed aside with what happened earlier today. The moment my phone lit up with a desperate, terrified call from Annika, I knew something had gone terribly wrong. I could hear it in her panicked, terrified voice.

Ulkan followed her to Kyoto. He used Valon as bait to draw Kenzo and Takeshi to a luxurious house in the Kamigyo Ward. That was where Ulkan ambushed them, took Kenzo, and all hell broke loose.

It turns out Kenzo wasn't the prize Ulkan was hunting.

He wanted Annika.

When she called me in a panic after Kenzo was taken, I hacked into the Kyoto municipal CCTV system and tracked the license plate of Ulkan's car to where he was holding Kenzo.

And now, it's over.

Ulkan Gacaferi is dead.

I slump back further in my chair, feeling the weight of that truth sink into my bones. My body feels drained, exhausted. It's like someone *finally* hit

the pause button on the chaos that's been my life, and now the adrenaline is draining out of me, leaving nothing but fatigue and a cold wash of relief.

For days—*weeks*—I've been walking around with a gnawing fear that something awful was lurking around the corner. Every time I closed my eyes, I could feel it, looming.

I don't know if that's because my like-a-sister best friend was half a world away from me for the first time in pretty much ever, or because Mal pulled the rug out from under me.

Maybe both.

And *maybe* I'd prefer not to look too hard into that because I'm worried what I might find.

Whatever. It's over now.

Before I can really let that sink in, Annika speaks again. Her voice shakes a little this time, like she's finally letting herself breathe, too.

"There's something else, Frey."

I stiffen, wondering if that's hope I hear in her voice.

"She clears her throat. "Valon's dead, too."

I freeze, my pulse spiking again.

"*W-what*?" I stammer.

"He got away from Ulkan's place after they took Kenzo. He was *really* cut up, Frey. The police just called: they found his body in a ditch across the street from that house."

It takes a moment for the words to register, but when they do, the relief that crashes over me is overwhelming, a tidal wave that knocks me off my feet. I sink back into the chair, my heart pounding, my hands trembling.

Valon Leka, the monster who kept Annika and I in little gilded cages while he abused her—the man who almost broke her—is fucking *dead*.

It's over.

It’s *really* over.

I let out a shaky breath, my head dropping into my hands as a tear slips down my cheek—whether from relief or exhaustion, I’m not sure. Maybe both.

“You’re serious?” I whisper.

“*Fuck yes*,” Annika mutters, bitterness and satisfaction on her lips. “I almost feel like I should send flowers to Ulkan’s family for cutting that fucker up so badly.”

For so long, Valon was this dark, looming threat, a shadow that she and I could never quite shake. And now, he’s just…gone. I don’t know what to say.

Annika’s voice drops, barely audible over the phone. “It’s finally over, Freya.”

I exhale again, slumping into the chair as I start to grin.

“Mal was a huge help getting Kenzo free.”

Hearing the name is a slap to the face I wasn’t ready for. My stomach lurches, the phone suddenly cold in my hand, every muscle in my body tense. I hadn’t expected that. Hadn’t wanted that.

Not after everything. Not after he *left* and fucked off to Japan and vanished from my life without a word. As if none of it mattered. As if *I* didn’t matter.

I take a shaky breath, trying to swallow down the sick feeling bubbling up inside me. I hate that just hearing his name makes my heart race, that it still affects me. What we had wasn’t a *relationship*. It was just a messed-up arrangement.

I should be *glad* he got bored of me and went to find some other victim for his sick games. That I’m free of him.

Why the hell does it sting so much?

The bitterness sinks deeper into my chest, filling the spaces he carved out. He took everything. My control. My freaking *virginity*. And then he just—

walked away. No explanation. No closure. Nothing.

Annika must sense my mood shift, because her voice softens. “You okay?”

I force myself to breathe, plastering a fake smile on my face that I hope will come through to my voice. “Yeah! I’m fine, just fucking *relieved*, you know? And I guess, sort of in shock?”

“*Same*,” she breathes. “It hasn’t really sunk in yet.” She clears her throat. “Hey, Frey?”

“Yeah?”

“Wanna come to Kyoto?”

I grin widely. “Aww, missin’ me?”

She snorts. “Don’t be a dork. *Obviously*. It’s been fucking forever since I got some Frey time, and I know Kenzo would love to see you, too.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Excuse me? Since when do you care what *Kenzo* wants?”

She laughs, but it’s softer than usual. Suddenly, I get it. Something’s changed between them. The whole point of Annika and Kenzo’s marriage was just to prevent all-out war between the Yakuza and the Bratva.

But now?

“Ahem, would you say it’s getting *a bit serious* with your husband?”

She laughs lightly. “I’ll explain when you visit,” Annika says, almost shyly. “But yeah, things are…*different*.”

I should be happy for her. I *am* happy for her. But the hollow feeling gnaws at me, pulling me under. Annika’s found something real, something unexpected. And here I am, left alone with nothing but radio silence.

After we say goodbye and I hang up, the elated relief I felt earlier is gone, replaced with that gnawing ache. Annika has Kenzo. She has something stable, something that’s real.

And me?

I'm just left sitting in the middle of the mess that Mal created.

I HATE myself for doing it, but the next day, I'm checking my phone again, scrolling through my messages hoping for some sign of him. But it's always the same—nothing. A void.

God, I'm pathetic.

The problem isn't just that he left. It's that the moody asshole turned me into a fucking *addict* before he did. I've always had a fairly high sex drive, just nobody to explore that drive *with*.

Then Mal barged into the picture, knocked down my walls, ripped me out of my comfort zone, and blew my fucking mind.

…And then *left*.

And now I'm floundering, anxiously trying to score a fix that scratches that Mal itch, like a fucking junkie.

Believe me, I've had *all sorts* of alone time, just me and my fingers and a vibrator, since he left.

It's not the slightest bit the same. And *I hate it*.

With a frustrated sigh, I open my social media. It's a distraction at best, but maybe that's what I need right now. Anything to stop thinking about him. I scroll through Hana's latest posts first, pictures of gorgeously presented food at fancy restaurants and scenic views.

She lives a life that seems so uncomplicated, so *normal*…if regimented and precise. I wonder what it's like to wake up in the morning without the weight of secrets crushing you, without the constant fear of who's watching or waiting in the shadows. To know exactly what your day will bring.

Takeshi's feed is the usual chaotic mess of motorcycles, fast cars, and rowdy nights out. A world of adrenaline, mayhem and havoc. I scroll through his recent posts, barely paying attention. Then a photo from a few

days ago, taken at some club, catches my eye. In the background, sitting in a dimly lit corner, is Mal.

My heart stutters to a stop.

There's a girl draped across his lap, her arm wrapped possessively around his neck.

What the fucking FUCK.

The jealousy hits me so hard I almost drop my phone. I zoom in on the picture, my blood *boiling* as I stare at the image.

I mean, it's not like he's my boyfriend…I guess. But is he fucking *serious*?! After everything we did, everything we shared, he's just moved on and is out there sharing the darkness I found in him with random girls?

Fury twists in my gut, hot and ugly. I can't believe I let him get to me like this. Can't believe I gave him something *so personal* only for him to throw it back in my face.

Fuck him.

Fuck all of it.

I toss my phone aside, hating myself for caring so much. For letting him get under my skin.

As if triggered by the impact of hitting the bed behind me, my phone rings. I turn to scowl at it before seeing Damian's number on the screen.

"We're going out."

He grunts the words even before I can make a crack about bedpans. Damian's out of the hospital now. He *should* be here at Kir's place so I can keep an eye on him, but he's insisted on staying at his place to heal up.

Emphasis on "heal up". Not "go out".

"I'm sorry, what?"

"We're going out, Frey," Damian grumbles. "I'm losing my fucking mind being cooped up in here."

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, the two-story glass penthouse overlooking Central Park with the personal chef, maid, and twenty-four-hour nursing care sounds like a real fucking drag, D.”

He snorts. “You know me. I need *people*. To go out. Listen to some music, or dance or some shit. See where the night takes me.”

I sigh. “Why does that sound like code for you wanting to go out and get laid?”

Damian chuckles. “You manage to make friends with a single girl yet that you could invite out?”

I frown. “Okay, A, you’re high if you think you’re going out clubbing. You’re still healing. And B, if I even had any, I’d send my girlfriends on dates with Jeffery Dahmer before you.”

He barks out a laugh. “First of all, *ouch*. Second of all, Dahmer fucked and killed dudes. So your non-existent girlfriends would be fine. That said, they’d still be unequivocally *finer* with me.”

“Still a moot point, because I don’t have—”

“I know Ulkan Gacaferi is dead, Freya. I also heard that shit-stain Valon is, too.”

Damian’s never known the full story of Anni’s and my history with Valon. If he did, I’m pretty sure he’d have hunted Valon down and ripped his head off.

But Valon was a dangerous, well-guarded piece of shit, and Damian could easily have gotten himself killed in the process of beheading that monster. Plus, Annika and I both wanted to keep that past *in* the past.

But his words give me pause. I mean, he’s got a point. The nightmares hounding Annika and me are both dead. My shoulders *do* feel lighter. Maybe it is an occasion to go out and celebrate?

And to try and shake Mal from your head.

That one makes me scowl. It’s also the one that sticks. Maybe going out, having some drinks, and dancing until my head spins is the perfect way to

try and forget about him.

I clear my throat. “Damian, you’re still healing—”

“I wasn’t asking permission, Frey. I wanted to see if you wanted to join me.”

I smirk. “Why do I feel like I’m going to be your chaperone?” I make a face. “Or…wing-woman?”

He snickers. “No idea what you’re talking about. I’m picking you up in an hour. Be ready.”

THE MUSIC PULSES in the air, the bass thudding deep in my chest as I take another sip of my cocktail. I glance over at Damian sitting across from me in the booth, his usual cocky grin on full display as he talks to the group we came with.

I’m fine going out to a quiet—or even loud—bar alone. But Damian is Bratva royalty, and royalty never goes out alone.

And *definitely* not without making a splash.

We’re at *Achtung*, an ultra-chic, ultra “scene”, ultra *loud* club in Soho full of models, finance types, and a who’s-who of young, rich New York.

Supposedly. I haven’t the slightest clue who those people are, but Damian at least travels on the periphery of those circles.

But that’s pretty much who we’re out with: a handful of bored, drugged-up fashion models, two guys who look like they only exist to sell the fashion models coke, and a couple of higher-up *avtoritets* in the Nikolayev Bratva dressed like cliché Russian mobsters.

Bratva royally *also* doesn’t go out without protection. We’re joined by about ten of Damian’s soldiers, including—much to my chagrin, since he keeps staring at me—Dimitri.

As I’m looking out over the dance floor, I have the misfortune to catch Dimitri’s eye. He nods his chin at me, grinning what I’m sure he hopes is his most winning, charming smile. I flash a weird face and an even weirder dance move his way before pulling my gaze to Damian.

I scowl as I watch him toss back the drink in his hand like there’s no tomorrow.

“You’re supposed to be taking it easy,” I murmur, leaning in close so only he can hear.

Damian shoots me a lopsided grin, his violet eyes glinting under the flashing club lights. “*Relax*. It was just a bullet, Frey. Not a lobotomy or open-heart surgery.”

I glare at him. “They literally *did* operate on your heart, dumbass.”

“It would seem I’m invincible, then,” he smirks back.

I roll my eyes but can’t suppress the smile tugging at my lips. That’s Damian for you—always brushing off the seriousness of everything.

“Still,” I say, my tone firm, “you’re *not* bulletproof—”

“The fuck I’m not,” he grins before sighing. “Frey, please, just enjoy yourself for once. You can even go dance with someone and I won’t pull the overprotective brother card.”

“Really?”

“I mean…maybe,” he shrugs.

I laugh.

“Seriously, you look great, Frey. And those fuckers Ulkan and Valon are dead. Why not live a little?”

I clear my throat, glancing down at myself.

Okay, I *do* look hot, thanks to Damian, who made me go back upstairs when he picked me up and change out of my black jeans and hoodie into “something that they’ll actually let through the door”.

I decided to take that idea and run with it, coming back down half an hour later in my current ensemble: a short, strapless, shiny black vinyl dress with matching vinyl thigh-high boots and black choker.

I sigh, glaring at Damian as I take another sip of my drink. “I’m just saying, you don’t need to prove anything by drinking the bar dry.”

Damian laughs, leaning back in his seat. “Don’t worry about me, sis. I’m fine.”

I sigh, shaking my head, pushing whatever lingering thoughts I have concerning Mal away to focus on the moment and enjoy the night. I ignore the rest of these people Damian’s dragged along with us…whoever they are…and just focus on the fact that he and I are out, sharing some drinks, maybe even having a good time.

The alcohol is doing its job, making everything feel lighter. I even find myself laughing at a seriously *gross* joke one of Damian’s *avtoritets* makes.

But after another two hours or so, I notice Damian gritting his jaw a little tighter, his face a little paler. I march over, giving my most withering “goth chick” look to the girl sitting draped all over him. She swallows, looking nervously at him. Even Damian nods for her to take a hike.

“You’re going home,” I mutter. “Don’t even try to fight me on this. You look like you’re in pain.”

He grimaces. “I’m…”

I glare right at him. Damian sighs.

“Fine, fuck,” he grunts. “Okay, it might be time to call it. Let’s bounce.”

I snort. “What’s this ‘we’ shit? You dragged me out and forced me to have fun. I’m staying.”

He sighs, rolling his eyes. “I’m not just leaving you here, Frey.”

“I’m a big girl, D. I think I can survive a little dancing without you.”

His brow furrows. “Fine, but I’m leaving half my men here.”

I sigh. “Oh, well, yes that sounds *very* relaxing and definitely not intrusive at all.”

He rolls his eyes. “Try to stay out of trouble, Freya.”

Once he’s gone, the empty seat beside me feels *too* empty. His entourage also seems to fade away, having no interest in hanging out with yours-truly without the crown prince himself being here too. The laughter that was bubbling up inside me moments ago fades, replaced with the familiar heaviness. Without Damian here, it’s like the club is overwhelming me, the noise too loud, the lights too harsh.

I take another sip of my drink, trying to drown out the tangled mess of thoughts swirling in my mind. But there’s no escaping them. Not tonight.

Scowling to myself, I pull out my phone. But before I can navigate to Takeshi Mori’s Insta again to glare at the picture of Mal with *that fucking girl*, I stop myself.

I mean, seriously. This is pathetic.

I put the phone away, taking a heavier gulp of my drink as I try to push Mal from my mind. But it’s like he’s there in the shadows, looming over me even when he’s nowhere to be found. Even when he’s made it abundantly clear by flying to the other side of the fucking world without so much as a goodbye that whatever we had is over and done with.

I *hate* how much space he takes up in my head.

Soon after Damian leaves, I start to feel *super* weird sitting alone in the VIP booth. I make my way through the crowd, dancing a little on my way to the bar for another drink.

“You look beautiful tonight.”

I start, turning to see Dimitri grinning down into my face.

“Uh, thanks,” I smile politely. My gaze drifts to the drink in his hand, and I cock an eyebrow.

“I am not working tonight,” he shrugs.

“You just came out anyway?”

He keeps smiling at me.

Shit.

“Damian, he prefers the bimbos with the big tits and the fake tans. But me?” Dimitri’s grin gets even more salacious as his eyes sweep down over my body. “I think you are the perfect woman.”

I mean, I get that it’s meant to be a compliment, even if his delivery is a little…weird. My brows knit as I take a second to really look at Dimitri.

He’s not a bad looking guy. He’s tall, he’s built, and there’s a sexiness about his dark eyes and lashes. He’s got some cool tattoos, and I’ve noticed the little scar holes before in his ears, lips, and eyebrow from piercings I’m betting the Bratva wasn’t too keen on, so he removed them.

But more than any of that, right now more than ever, it’s clear that Dimitri really does have a thing for me. And for the first time, I’m wondering why I’ve never…

Okay, I know why.

Because I’m damaged. Because I don’t date *anyone*, not just men who work for Kir. But in a post-Mal world, has that changed? Have I “gotten over” my hangups enough to be open to casual dating or hookups?

Like, Dimitri isn’t a bad guy. He’s attractive enough. And he’s *here*, and I can’t deny that it feels good to have someone fawning over me when my mind is so wrapped up in Mal.

He *could* be a good distraction.

Could be.

But won’t.

Because even when the image of Mal with *that fucking girl* with her hands all over him roars into my head, I can’t even *try* to imagine being with Dimitri. Kissing him, or letting him touch me, or…*eww.*

No.

I get ripped out of my thoughts when Dimitri pulls close to me and wraps an arm around my waist. His palm runs up my back, then returns to my waist, lingering too low on my hip.

I smile flatly as I gently push his hand away.

Dimitri frowns, clearly not getting the message. “Please, Freya. You and I… We could have a good time.”

“I don’t think so, Dimitri. That’s not a good idea.”

“Why not?”

His hand slips around my waist again, gripping me a little tighter.

This time, I’m much more aggressive when I peel his fingers off me and push his hand away.

“I said *no*,” I snap coldly, my voice rising.

Dimitri looks taken aback, his face flushed—whether from embarrassment or alcohol, I don’t know. For a second, I think he’ll back off, but then he grabs my wrist, his grip tight and unrelenting.

“Freya,” he says, his voice lower, more insistent. “Don’t be like that.”

My skin crawls at the way he says my name and his fingers dig into my wrist. I yank my arm away.

“Excuse me,” I mutter, turning and storming off to the bathroom, needing to get away from him and his fucking hands. My heart is pounding, my blood boiling from a mix of alcohol and anger.

The one perk of sitting in the obnoxiously chi-chi “VIP booths” is that you get access to restrooms the rest of the club doesn’t. So I get to skip the line for the ladies’ room and instead slip past the velvet ropes and bouncers back into the uber-pretentious area.

The VIP restroom is small but quiet and empty, the music from the club muted behind the door. In the flickering candlelight illuminating the space, I splash water on my face, trying to calm myself, but it doesn’t help.

That’s when the door swings open, and Dimitri walks in.

My stomach twists and I whirl.

Fuck.

“Dimitri, get out,” I say, my voice sharp.

He doesn’t listen. He steps closer, his eyes glazed with alcohol and something dark and dangerous. “Come on, Freya. Don’t be like that. You know I’d be good for you.”

He reaches for me again, and this time, there’s nowhere for me to go. I’m backed up against the sink, my heart racing as panic surges through me.

“I said *no*,” I snap, pushing him away. He doesn’t stop.

“Let me make you feel good, Freya,” he groans, pinning me to the sink. His hands slide over my hip, and then one starts to push lower.

And lower.

Dimitri grabs for the hem of my short dress, trying to pull it up.

A million horrible memories come rushing to the surface. I go stiff and almost catatonic, my eyes looking through him, my mind leaving my body.

Going somewhere else. Shutting down. Pretending this isn’t happening.

I’m barely breathing as Dimitri lowers his mouth to my neck, kissing my skin with wet, sloppy kisses that have the bile rearing up in my stomach as my world turns black.

Then the bathroom door slams open with a force that shakes the walls. And out of nowhere, *Mal* appears.

Everything happens lightning fast after that. Mal grabs Dimitri by the collar, ripping him away from me and slamming him against the wall so hard I hear the breath leave Dimitri’s lungs. There’s a fury in Mal’s eyes unlike anything I’ve seen before as his fists connect with Dimitri’s face over and over, the sound of bone meeting flesh echoing through the small room.

I stand there, frozen, as Mal tears into Dimitri like a force of nature. He beats him to a bloody pulp, and then *keeps going*. It’s only then that I

realize that Mal doesn’t just want to hurt this man.

He wants to kill him.

“Mal,” I finally manage to choke out, my voice trembling.

He still doesn’t stop. He keeps hitting Dimitri until the light goes out of his eyes and his consciousness fades, slumping to the floor like a broken ragdoll.

Mal goes to hit him again, but I grab his wrist.

It’s only then that he snaps out of it, stepping back and breathing heavily, his hands covered in blood.

He turns toward me, his sharp eyes locking on mine. The intensity in his gaze sends a chill down my spine, but it’s not fear that grips me.

Without a word, Mal crosses the room, yanks me against his chest, lifts my chin, and brands my lips with his in the single most punishing, brutal, and all-consuming kiss of my life.

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MAL

EVERYTHING in my world narrows to the feeling of Freya beneath me, her lips soft yet demanding.

I don’t know how to stop.

I don’t know that I’d want to if I *could*.

My hands tangle possessively in her hair, pulling just enough to make her gasp against my mouth, and the sound sends a shockwave through my body.

She tastes like vodka and rebellion, like a sin I’ve already committed a thousand times in my mind but never in reality. I should stop. I know that. But my body never listens to reason when it comes to Freya.

Suddenly, she pulls away.

Her breath comes in short, sharp gasps, her eyes blazing as she stares at me. I reach for her instinctively, my fingers brushing her wrist to pull her back to me, to continue the kiss that I can still taste on my lips.

But before I can bring her close again, her palm cracks sharply across my cheek.

The slap isn’t gentle—it’s forceful and reverberates through my skull, freezing me in place. For a moment, the world slows to a stop, and we just stare at each other, both stunned by what just happened.

Her eyes widen with raw confusion flickering behind them. As if the slap wasn't just meant to snap *me* out of something.

It was meant to rip her from wherever her head just went, too.

Freya's breath hitches, her chest rising and falling rapidly, and for a heartbeat, we're caught in that place between rage and desire. Then she whirls around, storming out of the small bathroom and quickly disappearing into the hallway that leads back to the VIP area.

I'm faster.

I'm on her in seconds, catching her wrist and yanking her back toward me. Her wide, wild eyes meet mine, and it's all I can do to keep myself from pinning her against the wall and devouring her. I can't think, can't focus. I'm drowning in everything Freya always brings out in me—anger, desire, guilt—and none of it makes sense.

She yanks her arm back but I hold firm, my grip tightening, keeping her close.

"What the *fuck* are you doing here?!" she spits, her voice shaking with a mixture of fury, shock, and alcohol.

"We're not *talking* about me," I snarl. "We're talking about whatever the fuck was going on in there with that fucking prick!" I jab a finger at the restroom.

She gapes at me. "Did you seriously fly from Japan just to make sure another man wasn't touching me?!"

Maybe.

Probably.

Yes.

But I don't respond. I just step closer, my towering presence swallowing the space between us. I can still feel the heat of her anger radiating off her skin, but behind it, there's something more. Something vulnerable.

“You disappeared,” she continues, her voice cracking. “You just walked away without a word. Not one text, not one call. *Nothing*. And now you show up out of nowhere like—like I *belong* to you?!”

My jaw clenches, and I step even closer, pushing her against the wall. I’m losing control, and I know it. But she’s pushing me to the brink, and the raw emotion in her voice is like pouring gasoline on a fire.

“You don’t get to do that!” she screams. “You don’t get to come back and act like everything is fine. Like you didn’t just abandon me. Like what happened between us *didn’t mean anything*!”

Her voice breaks, and something inside me stirs awake. Her words are dismantling the walls I’ve spent years building around myself, brick by brick.

Everything between us meant something.

Still does.

I want to say it. The words are hovering on the tip of my tongue, but they don’t come. Instead, I just step closer, my body caging hers against the wall, my hands sliding down to rest on her hips. She’s trembling, but she doesn’t try to escape.

“I left because I had responsibilities, Freya,” I growl. “To the Yakuza, and my family.”

Her chest heaves with the force of her emotions as she stares up at me, her lips parted in shock. My hands tighten on her hips, pulling her closer until our bodies are almost flush against each other.

“Why now?” she whispers, her voice unsteady. “Why come back here now? To—what, prove you can still control me? Prove that I still belong to you?”

One of my hands darts out to grab her hip, pinning her to the wall. The other wraps around her throat.

Not hard, but enough to turn her face crimson and set a tantalizing fire blazing in her eyes as my thumb strokes her pulse point.

“You *do* belong to me,” I growl.

The admission feels like it's torn from a part of myself I've been trying to bury for weeks. I hate that she's gotten under my skin like this, that no matter how far I run, no matter how much distance I put between us, she's always there.

Freya's eyes search mine. I can see in them the war she's fighting with herself, the struggle on her face. She wants to deny it, to push me away, but she can't.

"Why did you leave?" she demands, her voice cracking.

I don't answer right away. How can I explain the storm raging inside me? The way she quiets the chaos in my head, even as she drives me mad?

"Because I knew if I stayed, I'd consume you," I finally growl.

Her eyes soften for a split second, and that look—that briefest moment of vulnerability—almost undoes me. Then her expression hardens again.

"You don't get to decide that," she snaps. "You don't get to bounce in and out of my life whenever you feel like it!"

Guilt crashes into me. She's right, and I don't deserve the way she looks at me, like she's waiting for me to say all the right things that will make this all make sense.

I don't have those words.

"You *left*," she says again, her voice tight and angry. "You just disappeared. And now, golly-gee, you're back!" Her eyes narrow. "I'm not some *prostitute* for you to just *screw* whenever you feel like it!" she snaps.

Her words hit me like a punch. And the problem with me and punches is that I only have one reaction when someone throws one at me.

I throw one back.

"I didn't hear any complaints before."

Regret immediately hits me like a truck, but it's too late. Her expression shifts, fury and betrayal flooding her face.

"*Fuck you*, Mal," she spits, shoving me hard.

I stumble back into the wall. Before I can recover, she bolts, leaving me standing there, cursing under my breath.

Fuck.

I push away from the wall and charge after her, barreling through the VIP section. The thumping bass of the club's sound system fills the air, but all I can focus on is Freya as she shoves through the crowd.

I catch up to her outside, grabbing her arm, spinning her around, and slamming her back against the cold brick wall of the alley.

"What the hell are you doing?" she snaps.

I'm not thinking clearly, but I need her to listen and maybe understand, even if I don't understand myself.

"I don't *do* this," I growl. "I don't do relationships. That's not me."

Freya glares, her eyes flashing as she barks out a cold laugh. "I'm not asking you to be my fucking *boyfriend*, asshole! I'm asking for basic human decency!"

"Fresh out of that, too," I snarl.

It's true. Kasper beat any decency out of me years ago. Or maybe I never had it to begin with. Either way, any softness or kindness I was born with—it's long gone.

This is who I am now. And I don't know how to be anyone else.

Anger flashes in Freya's face as she juts out her chin at me. "You don't get to come into my life, fuck with my head, and then just walk away when it suits you."

Her chest heaves as she glares at me. I want to shut her up with a kiss, force her to stop talking and throwing my own weaknesses back in my face. But I can't. Not yet.

"*I'm not doing this anymore*, Mal," she says, her voice breaking. "I just can't do this whiplash with you."

Freya yanks herself away from me, turning and storming off into the night.

I don’t know how to stop this. I don’t know how to fix it. So instead, I do what I always do.

Throw fuel on the fire, and probably make shit worse.

In a few strides I catch up to her again, grabbing her arm and spinning her around to face me.

“Do *not* walk away from me,” I growl, my grip tightening on her arm.

She jerks her arm, trying to break free, but I pull her closer, pinning her against the cold bricks of the alley wall. Her chest rises and falls rapidly as she glares up at me with wild, angry eyes.

“I’m not letting you go,” I snarl, my voice low and dangerous. “Not now. Not ever.”

Her eyes widen, but she doesn’t say anything. The air between us is charged, electric, the tension crackling like a live wire about to snap.

“You’re *mine*,” I growl, my lips brushing against her ear, my voice a rough whisper. “And I’ll never let you forget it.”

Freya’s pulse races under my touch, and her hands come up but then stop, resting against my chest as if she can’t decide whether to shove me away or pull me closer. Her breath comes in short gasps, her lips parted as she stares up at me, her eyes wide and wild.

“I hate you,” she whispers, her voice shaky.

I smirk, leaning closer, my lips brushing against her neck. “*No, you don’t*.”

She trembles, her body responding to my touch even as her mind fights it. I can feel the conflict raging inside her, the way she’s so torn.

And I love it.

I love the chaos I stir up in her very blood.

“Let me go,” she whispers. The words are weak, barely a protest.

I tighten my grip on her hips, pulling her closer until there’s no space between us. “*No*.”

Her breath catches in her throat as she stares up at me with wide, wild eyes. She hates me. I know she does. But she wants me just as much. *That's* what drives me crazy and makes this so addictive, so dangerous.

I lean down, my lips brushing across hers, a rough whisper escaping my mouth. "You're mine, Freya."

And then I kiss her.

It's not gentle. Not soft. It's a possessive, desperate kiss that claims her and reminds her who she belongs to. Her hands clutch at my shirt, pulling me closer, and for a moment, we're lost in the chaos of each other, in the fury and passion burning between us.

When I pull back, staring down at her flushed face and trembling lips, something else is flickering in her eyes—something vulnerable and broken.

"*You left,*" she whispers again, her voice small.

The words hit me harder than I expect. For a brief moment, the fury inside me quiets. I stare down at her, my chest tightening with something I don't want to name and can't afford to feel.

"But I came back," I murmur roughly.

She looks up at me, her eyes searching mine, and everything stills. The anger, the desire, the chaos—it all fades away, leaving just the two of us, standing in the alley, clinging to each other like we're the only things keeping each other from falling apart.

But I know better.

This isn't something that can be fixed with words or kisses. This is something darker and much more dangerous.

I can't save her from *me*.

But I also can't let her go.

So…I don't.

I kiss her again, harder. This time, she does pull away, wrestling herself out of my grip with a choked gasp.

“This is *done*, Mal,” she blurts, her voice shaking with fury. “This…*thing* between us. It’s over.”

“That’s not your decision to make,” I growl harshly. “We still have an arrangement.”

Her eyes flare with anger, and she steps forward, jabbing her finger into my chest. “Fuck the arrangement! Just tell them!” she yells. “Tell Kir! Tell Sota! Tell everyone! *I don’t care anymore*, Mal!”

I blink, my mind whirling. I can feel her slipping, and no matter how hard I try to hold on, the ground is crumbling under my feet.

Freya’s voice softens, but there’s still an edge to it. “You’re here and then you’re not. You want me but you hate me.” Her gaze turns stony as she steps back, putting distance between us. “Why don’t I make this easy for you.”

A dark mania surges into my chest when I see the resolve in her eyes.

“How about you stay,” she says coldly, “and I walk away this time.”

She turns before I can respond, before I can even process the words, and storms away. I start to follow but stop when she gets into a black SUV I recognize as belonging to the Nikolayev organization.

The door shuts, and the car peels away from the curb. I watch her go, my chest full of anger, frustration, and something that feels too much like loss. The sight of her driving away sends a surge of anxiousness through me so foreign and uncomfortable that I almost don’t recognize it.

I *need* to let her go. It’s all I’ve ever done.

But with Freya, I can’t. The roaring in my head only quiets when she’s near.

And that’s a problem I don’t know how to solve.

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23

MAL

IT'S ALMOST DAYBREAK, that quiet hour when the world starts waking up as dawn creeps up on the horizon, smearing the sky with pale streaks of light. But inside my mind, it's nothing but darkness. A constant, unyielding roar.

I'm crouched in the shadows just outside Kir's Bronx mansion, still as a statue, watching.

Waiting.

Freya came back here hours ago, and I've been watching her ever since. There's something calming to me in the way she moves when she thinks no one is looking—unguarded, vulnerable. She didn't see me. She never does. But I see her, same as always.

I should leave her alone. Turn and walk away.

That's not happening.

The mansion's security patrols are regular as clockwork. It's easy to slip between the gaps and blend into the night. These guards aren't trained for someone like me—someone who's made a life out of remaining invisible.

I keep my eyes on the driveway, waiting for Kir's car. He's laughably predictable, a weakness I've always hated in men like him. Kir is normally up before dawn to work out, eat his customary breakfast, and have his cup and a half—no more, no less—of black coffee. Then he leaves the house for his first meeting with his advisors. Always at the same time.

When he leaves today, I'll get what I came for.

Sure enough, a few minutes later, the large black armored SUV rolls out to the gates. I watch his guards wave him through, and as soon as the car disappears around the bend, I move.

I slip across the lawn, keeping low, my footsteps light but deliberate. The mansion looms above me, its dark windows watching like a predator waiting to pounce. I bypass all the main entrances, knowing they'll be guarded, and find instead a second-floor balcony, easily reachable via the thick covering of ivy running up the side of the house.

Once up, the door's lock is easy to pick—disappointingly easy. The click of it disengaging sounds like a gunshot in the silence, but there's no one around to hear it. I slip into Kir's office, the scent of leather and whiskey hanging in the air.

He *really* should have better security.

The room is dark, the faint light from the approaching dawn filtering in through the high windows, casting long shadows across the floor. I make my way to Kir's desk, scanning the room for any alarms or traps.

Nothing. He clearly trusts his guards implicitly.

Another mistake.

I sit behind the desk and boot up his laptop. The screen flickers to life, and I'm faced with the standard login screen. I've cracked tougher codes in my sleep. A few precise keystrokes, a bypass here, a backdoor there, and bingo, I'm in.

I search the directories, combing through financial records, business deals, the usual shit. Honestly, I could copy this whole thing right now and make a *fortune* selling it to his competitors.

But pigs, as they say, get fat.

Hogs get slaughtered.

AKA, don't be fucking greedy.

Besides, I’m here for something else, something that will get me closer to the truth. Something I *didn’t* find when I broke into Orlov Financial Solutions’ offices that first night I crossed Freya’s path.

Then I see it.

A folder named *Lindqvist, William*.

I click on it, calmly scrolling through the files. There’s nothing groundbreaking—just a basic dossier like any crime boss would make on a rival or even a friend. That’s the nature of our world. I’ve compiled *insanely* invasive dossiers on close allies of the Mori-kai.

Hey, you never know.

I poke around Freya’s past, my brow furrowing when my gaze lands on some scanned documents.

Interesting.

It’s a domestic incident report, dated years ago, back when Freya was just a kid.

I lean forward, and my jaw tightens.

It would appear her father beat the shit out of her mother more than once. Bad enough that the household help, or *someone* in the house at least, called the police.

Obviously, nothing ever happened. They police came out because they had to make a show of doing so. But no charges were ever laid—not given what I’m sure William Lindqvist was paying the local authorities.

Nothing that I’m reading is *that* surprising. It’s common knowledge that Freya’s father was a backstabbing piece of shit. But the details paint an even darker picture than I expected. The violence, the control—it’s all there in black and white.

Then a line catches my eye: *Argument stemmed from allegations of infidelity.*

It doesn’t say who was cheating on whom, but, come on. I know what kind of man Freya’s father was. I can only assume it was him stepping out.

I pull a flash drive from my pocket and copy the entire file on William Lindqvist, making sure to leave no digital trace of my presence. When the transfer is complete, I pocket the drive and power down the computer.

Time to go.

But not before I see her.

I move silently through the house, my steps whispering on the polished floors. It’s too early for anyone to be awake, and the few guards inside won’t be patrolling the private quarters.

Silently, I push open the door to her room and I slip inside. It’s quiet, save for the soft sound of her breathing. She’s asleep, her body curled up beneath the blankets, her face relaxed in the soft glow of dawn seeping in through the curtains.

She looks peaceful, almost innocent. But I know better. Freya isn’t innocent. She’s been through hell, and it’s carved itself into her soul in ways I recognize because I’ve been through something similar.

For a moment, I just watch her. Then my hands curl into fists at my sides. The urge to touch her is overwhelming. I could wake her up. Tell her why I left. Tell her the truth that’s been gnawing at me since the moment I laid eyes on her. But I don’t. I stay still, my eyes drinking her in, memorizing the way the blankets move with each breath.

My gaze drifts to her lips, parted slightly as she breathes. I can still taste her, feel the softness of her mouth on mine. It’s a memory that’s burned into my brain, one I can’t shake no matter how hard I try.

I should leave.

I don’t.

I walk closer to the bed until I’m looming over her, watching her chest rise and fall beneath the covers.

I don’t think. I don’t weigh any of it out. I simply *do*.

I reach out and tug the sheet down a little. Freya barely stirs as it slips away from her neck and down over her rising and falling chest.

Fuck.

I was almost expecting a t-shirt or tank top. *Not* the see-through, lacy pale pink chemise covering—barely—her tits and falling only to her waist.

As my eyes adjust more to the darkness, I can make out the dusky pink of her areolas through the gauzy, elegantly sexy fabric.

This girl really does have a thing for luxury lingerie. She even *sleeps* in it.

And now, my curiosity—and my dick—are at full attention.

Freya shifts just a little as I pull the sheet the rest of the way from her. My eyes slide down to the matching lacy, see-through thong pulled tight against the tempting lips of her pretty pussy.

I should fucking go.

But I already know I won't.

Not before I've had a taste.

She murmurs in her sleep as I pull her hips gently to the edge of the bed. I drape her legs over my shoulders and move between her thighs. My finger traces up and down the seam of her cunt, feeling her grow warmer and wetter as she mewls softly.

She's still asleep when I roll my thumb over her clit through the material. She lets out a tiny snore when I slip a finger underneath the lace and tug the gusset of her panties aside, feasting my eyes on her bare, sweet, pink pussy.

Freya gasps quietly when my tongue drags up her lips, opening her up and tasting her sweetness like a man starving. I groan into her, relishing her whimpered little sleepy moans, the way her hips gently but eagerly rise to meet my mouth as she dreams.

I'm aware that this is fucked on a few levels. But then, we *do* have an arrangement. One she agreed to. Her words from earlier to "go ahead and tell them" echo in my head. Even so…

I didn’t. *Tell them*, that is. Which means Freya and I still have an arrangement.

She’s mine. *All of her*. Even if she’s fucking sleeping.

I growl into her pussy as I devour her, tonguing her clit hard enough to make her squirm and writhe, but not so hard that I rouse her. I want to ram my fingers into her—better yet, my cock. But *that* would most certainly wake her. And I’ll be honest, a sick, dark, fucked-up part of me is enjoying the fact that she’s fast asleep while I do this to her.

So I keep nibbling at her clit and sucking on her lips. I drag my tongue up and down, swirling it around her clit before dragging it all the way to her tight little asshole.

Yeah, that’ll be mine, too.

Soon.

For now, though, I just use my tongue, teasing her little hole with it and rubbing her clit as Freya *melts* into her bed. Her soft, sleepy whines of pleasure fill the room, her breath becoming faster and more urgent.

With a groan, I reach down and free my cock. My hand wraps around the swollen shaft, stroking hard as I savor the taste of her sweet sticky cunt on my lips and tongue.

This woman is fucking *delicious*, and I’m going to swallow every goddamn drop.

Her hips begin to writhe, her moans growing louder and more urgent. I bury my tongue in her pussy, fucking her shallowly with it before I pull her clit between my lips. My tongue is merciless, my fingertips stroking and teasing her skin as her back arches.

“*Maaaal*…” she coos softly in her sleep before she gasps sharply and jerks her hips off the bed, still asleep. I love the taste of her cum as it floods my tongue and lips. But what drives me over the fucking edge is what I heard right before it.

My name.

She said my fucking *name*.

With a grunt, I stand, pushing between her thighs and keeping her panties pulled aside as I stroke my swollen dick. My balls tighten and I bite back a growl as thick cum explodes from the head of my cock.

I grunt, stroking over and over as my hot, sticky cum splatters all over Freya's pussy and thighs. I watch with darkness blazing in my eyes as white streaks of cum drip down her flushed pink pussy lips, over her asshole and down her thighs.

Marking her as *mine*.

I'm still not done.

With my cock still out, I walk around to the head of the bed and kneel down beside her sleeping face.

I run the head of my cock over her lips, groaning when I see a few more drops of my cum leak onto her lips.

You're fucking mine…

I stand up and pull her panties back into place, gritting my teeth and groaning as I watch all my cum soak into them. Then I tuck her back into bed, pushing her hair back from her face before my thumb traces the pulse point of her neck.

I could stay here for hours, watching her, obsessing over the way she makes me feel like I'm not the broken monster I am. But I can't. Not tonight.

I take one last look at her, my fingers itching to reach out and touch her again. To pull her close and never let go.

To *fuck her*.

Instead, I step back, slipping out of the room as silently as I came in.

The mansion is utterly quiet as I make my way back to the office and the little balcony outside, the early morning light just starting to creep through the windows. Deep inside me, the darkness is still there, gnawing in the pit of my stomach and reminding me what I am.

As I step into the cool morning air, I feel the flash drive in my pocket. It’s not much, but it’s enough to give me a reason to keep digging. Enough to keep me tied to her.

I can’t let go, anyway.

Not now. Not ever.

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FREYA

THE COOL EVENING breeze brushes over my skin as I step off the sleek private jet onto the top step of the stairs leading down to the tarmac. The sky over Kyoto is a perfect twilight, with deep purples and blues casting a serene glow over the distant city.

The very air here feels different—calm. The quiet hum of the private airstrip nestled into the hills above Kyoto envelops me, and I let the peace and serenity of the moment sink in.

…That is, until said peace and serenity is *smashed* by a shrill scream.

I beam as my attention snaps to Annika, who's waiting for me at the bottom of the steps, a grin stretched wide across her face. With a scream of my own, I race down to her.

As soon as my feet hit the tarmac, she shrieks in excitement, bolting toward me. Without hesitation I run to meet her, the two of us colliding in a tight hug, laughing and spinning each other around like we haven't seen in each other in years.

"I've missed you *so much*!" she gushes, pulling back just enough to hold me at arm's length, her eyes bright and joyful. "This is going to be the best week ever. Kenzo and everyone are so excited you're here!"

I smile and try to focus on her excitement and genuine happiness as she continues to babble on, but all I can think about is who *won't* be happy to see me.

Mal.

It’s been almost a week since that night at the club, and—no surprise—he’s gone completely radio silent again. No calls, no texts. Nothing. I only know he’s even in Kyoto because of other people’s socials, which I may or may not have been stalking.

What?

As much as I want to say I was right to leave and to tell him our arrangement was over, I can’t lie.

I hate not having him around. A lot. It’s like he got me hooked on him, and then cut off the supply. I hate the ache his absence creates inside me—the gnawing emptiness that tugs and pulls me in his direction no matter how hard I try to resist. I hate how much I find myself hoping for a message, knowing it’ll never come.

I hate how much I still want him despite the chaos he brings into my life. I’ve even been having *insanely* vivid dreams, two of which I woke up from outrageously wet and legit breathless.

Shoving those thoughts aside, I focus on Annika, who is still talking animatedly before her eyes suddenly widen as she looks past me.

“Oh my god! I was wondering if you’d actually come.”

Kir chuckles as he walks down the stairs, followed by the quiet-as-usual Isaak.

“Being that we’ve entered into this peace treaty with the Yakuza—”

“You mean being that I *married into* the Yakuza, but yes, please, go on,” Annika grins teasingly.

Kir rolls his eyes, shaking his head. “Well, exactly. It felt like a good opportunity to come and visit Sota too. We can talk business all day over the phone, but it’s important to occasionally break bread and share a drink with your allies.”

Annika gives first him and then Isaak a hug before we all pile into the cars and leave the airstrip. Japan has been on my bucket list forever, and Kyoto

is *stunning*, so I keep my face glued to the window as we wind through the scenic hills, taking it all in.

Annika's voice lowers conspiratorially as she whispers to me about Kenzo's mansion. "This place is *insane*. Kenzo took it over from the head of this other Yakuza family that he…you know…"

I draw a line across my neck and make a dramatic "death" sound.

Annika snickers. "I fucking missed you, weirdo."

"Ha! Missed you more."

Kir chuckles. "You know, she's a married woman now, Freya."

"Yeah, to her *second* hubby," I shrug. "You know I'll always be her first and favorite."

Annika hoots in laughter as she hugs me. Kir just sighs.

"Judging from the glow she's got on her face," he grins, "I'm not so sure I'd bet on that, Freya."

"Pfft. Who asked you, anyway," I tease back, returning my attention to the window and the stunning views.

Gorgeous as it is, the closer we get to the house, the more my thoughts are completely consumed by *him*.

Mal.

The moment we arrive at Kenzo's mansion, I understand what Annika was talking about. It's *breathtaking*. Nestled high in the hills overlooking old Kyoto, the estate is a mix of traditional Japanese architecture and modern style, blending seamlessly into the lush gardens surrounding it. It's a fortress of luxury where old meets new.

"A toast!" Kir smiles, tapping the side of his vodka glass.

We've had dinner in one of the lush gardens on the grounds of Kenzo's estate, and now the whole mad gathering has turned into a party. Everyone's here: Annika and Kenzo, Hana, Takeshi, Kir, Isaak, Sota, and a number of

Sota's and Kenzo's people. All smiling around the garden, drinking and having a grand old time.

Well, not *everyone* is here. In the four hours I've been here, I've still yet to get a single glimpse of Mal.

Just the same, I'm having fun. I'm ignoring the black cloud that his absence always brings, and instead choosing to have a ball with my best friend in the world and the man she is *clearly* now head over heels for.

I limit myself to *one* joke about being Annika's "first wife" and telling Kenzo that he'd better watch himself. But he appreciates my weird humor, or at least does a really great job of pretending to.

Sota is *tickled* when I lift my shirt up to my ribs and show him my *Memento Mori* tattoo after a few drinks, hooting that perhaps we need to strengthen the Yakuza-Bratva bond by having me marry Takeshi, since I've already got his last name on my skin.

There's an even bigger laugh from the older Yakuza boss when Tak and I make the same puke face at the same time.

That said, even though I'd never in a million years *marry* Takeshi, I like the guy. All of Kenzo's siblings—yes, including Mal—are different, and yet seem to carry the same fierce streak. Hana is a boss bitch on steroids—all business and clean cut, surgical edges. Mal's the dark, somber, slightly scary one.

Takeshi, though, is pure unadulterated chaos, to the point where I'm legitimately wondering if he actually *has* crashed one of his barely street-legal motorcycles and done some brain damage. He's constantly in motion, with this almost maniacal, psychotic glint in his eye, like he's about to challenge death to an arm wrestling match or a car race down a mountain road.

He's also *fun* as *hell*, and even loves some of the same weird, esoteric bands that I do. Plus he's promised to take me out on a couple of his crazy souped-up bikes for a ride around the hills outside Kyoto while I'm here, which sounds super fun.

I laugh and have some drinks. Hana, Annika and I do some lame karaoke and throw an impromptu dance party, even getting Kir out on the floor.

This is what I need—normalcy. Friends. A night of fun without constantly looking over my shoulder, waiting for the other shoe to drop. But I just can't shake the emptiness that lingers.

Mal's absence feels like a weight that pulls me down even when I don't want it to.

Kenzo and Annika are standing at the far end of the garden, wrapped up in each other like they're the only two people in the world. There's something about the way they look at each other—unspoken, easy. It tugs at something deep inside me that leaves me feeling hollow.

Love should be simple.

But with Mal… Nothing ever is.

I force a smile and walk over to grab Annika's hand, pulling her toward the dance floor. "You owe me a dance, bitch."

She laughs, glancing to Kenzo before letting me drag her away. "God, I've missed this," she says, her eyes sparkling. "Just us, having fun. No drama."

I grin, spinning her around as the music picks up. "Yep, no drama."

No Mal, either.

Fuck.

AFTER…OKAY…A *little* bit of drama involving Sota's business manager Tengen getting seriously drunk and saying some disgusting shit to Annika, the party keeps going. But eventually, once Kenzo and Annika—unsurprisingly, given how cozy they've been all night—disappear, the party starts to wind down.

Takeshi is off in the huge garage, which he apparently lives above, showing off his bikes and cars to Kir and Isaak. Sota bids us all goodnight and heads back to his place in Nakagyo-ku in central Kyoto with his guards.

Eventually, it's just Hana and I sitting in the garden, each with a glass of wine as we gaze up at the stars overhead.

"I really needed a night like this," she sighs, turning to glance at me. "You?"

"Same," I nod. "Tonight was fantastic."

I swirl the drink in my glass, trying to lose myself in the quiet, but my mind is elsewhere. Hana eyes me for a moment, the weird silence dragging on. Suddenly, she clears her throat, and when I glance over, she's smirking at me slightly with a raised brow.

"If you're looking for Mal, he's in the guest house." She turns and nods across the gorgeous landscaping and gardens of the Mori estate, to the faint light of a smaller house in the distance. "He's basically taken it over as his spot, like Tak has coopted the garage."

I tense, my heart skipping a beat.

"Why would I be looking for Mal?" I ask, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

Hana raises a perfect eyebrow.

"I'm not," I insist, but the denial sounds weak even to me.

Hana just laughs, giving me a knowing smile. "It's none of my business. *Any*way, I'm off to bed. Night, Freya."

"Night," I mutter, watching her head indoors.

Mal *is* here. I've been biting back the urge since I got here to ask *anyone* where he might be, assuming he's away on a business thing.

And he's been right here all night, a hundred feet away.

I should feel relieved—or maybe angry—that he never even popped his head out to say hi. But all I feel is my chest tightening at the prospect of

seeing him again. At the idea of him being so close, yet so far away.

I take another sip of my wine, trying to ignore the ache that never seems to leave. I could go find him, confront him, ask him why he always disappears, why he's put me through this twisted game over and over.

Instead, I sit back on the outdoor lounge chair, staring out at the soft glow of Kyoto's city lights.

Why should I be the one to go to him?

I drain the rest of my glass and set it down, the weight of the night pressing down on me. I tell myself that this ache, this need for him, is all in my head.

Deep down, I know that's a lie.

Mal is here. And as much as I hate to admit it, I just wish he'd come find me.

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FREYA

I STAND JUST outside the guest house, my heart pounding in my chest, scowling to myself.

Why should I be the one to go to him?

And yet here I am.

Maybe it's a masochistic streak in me. Or a pathological pathetic-ness. Maybe I've just had one too many glasses of wine and this is an all-around terrible idea I should sleep on.

Maybe the real problem is that Mal keeps thinking I want more from him.

The building is quiet, dimly lit, and such a contrast to the mansion behind me. It *is* secluded, separated from the main house by a series of little walkways through old trees, bamboo groves, and gardens filled with little shrines. But it feels secluded, too, almost like it exists in a separate world.

I should turn around. Walk away. Go back to the safety of the mansion and pretend this pull toward him doesn't exist. But I know I won't.

My hand trembles as I grip the handle and push open the door without knocking.

"What are you doing in here, Freya?"

I gasp, electricity jolting through my body as his voice rumbles from the darkness. I shiver, allowing my eyes to adjust to the low light.

Mal is standing with his back to me, his broad shoulders tense, his body still. He's by a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that look out through the trees at all of Kyoto below. The lights are off inside, but with the moonlight coming in, I can see that the guesthouse is a big, open, double-height great room with a balcony around the perimeter of the second floor, almost like a traditional karate *dojo*.

When I don't immediately answer, Mal turns to me, his silhouette dark against the lights of the city and the moonlight behind him. The trees outside the window wave slightly in the breeze, and as the moonlight shifts, I realize he's shirtless, the white gleam from outside illuminating his grooved muscles and heavy tattoo ink.

My bottom lip retreats between my teeth as I feel the sharp icy-blue glint of his eyes pierce the divide between us and right into my soul. Then I shrug. "You weren't out there."

His eyes lock with mine, and just like every time before, my breath catches. There's *so much* unsaid between us, so much tension crackling in the air. I don't know how long we stand there, staring at each other, but I can hear my pulse thundering in my ears.

"I'm not going to tell them," he finally growls, his voice quieter.

"Tell who what?" I frown, stepping closer.

He clenches his jaw as his eyes flick away from mine. "You know what I mean."

I stiffen. He's talking about Kir and my family—the people I love most. The people I've been terrified would find out the truth about where I came from, and my father, and everything else I've tried to bury.

Mal looks at me, his eyes dark and unreadable. "I know what it's like to finally find something close to family." He swallows hard. "I'm not going to destroy that for you."

The words hit me like a punch to the gut, and my heart clenches. I wasn't expecting this sudden admission and rare glimpse into the man he is underneath the layers of darkness and control. He's spent so long keeping

me at arm's length, and now, just for a split-second, I see it. His vulnerability.

I don't know what to say. My mind is reeling with a mixture of emotions, but all I can do is stare at him, the tension between us palpable.

"So where does that leave us?" I finally ask, my voice quiet but firm.

Mal's eyes harden. "There is no us," he growls. "Our arrangement is terminated. You're free to go."

The words hit me like a slap. But I stay rooted to the spot, my gaze locked on his. "I'm still here," I whisper.

He steps toward me slowly. "I'm giving you a fucking out, Freya," he snarls. "You think you want the monster in me? Trust me, you *don't*," he rasps. "You haven't seen the worst of me."

My pulse quickens, but I hold my ground. "*I'm still here*."

"Yes, because you're not fucking listening!" he barks, darkness flashing in his eyes, his body coiling like a snake ready to strike, his bare arms and shoulders clenching and rippling. He looks like he's battling some inner demon, like he's fighting with himself, Jekyll and Hyde.

"I don't have the boyfriend gene," he spits. "I'm not capable of giving you what you want. I'm *not* that man."

I take a deep breath, but I don't falter. "I never once said I wanted that."

A dark smile tugs at the corners of his mouth, but it's not kind. It's laced with bitterness and self-loathing. "Then what do you want, Freya?"

The room feels impossibly small, the air thick with tension. My throat tightens, but I force the words out. "Maybe I don't need the emotions and the relationship."

His lips curl into a smirk that is utterly devoid of warmth. "So just sex?" His voice is mocking, but underneath that, I can sense the anger, the desire, the fear. "Just me fucking you like a greedy little cumslut? That's what you want?"

Fuck.

Yes.

Yes?

“Maybe,” I whisper, the word hanging between us like a challenge.

Mal’s head shakes side to side. “If you stay here one more second, I’m not going to hold back,” he growls, his voice rough and raw. “And believe me, I *have been*.”

“No one asked you to do that,” I whisper quietly. My feet start to move on their own, carrying me toward him.

Mal barks mirthlessly. “What the fuck do you want, Freya?”

My heart pounds in my chest. I know I’m standing on the brink of something dangerous, in front of a gaping maw that could devour me whole, but I can’t walk away. I don’t want to.

I don’t know *how* to.

“You,” I whisper as I come to a stop a foot away from him. “I want *you*.”

Mal’s body stiffens, his eyes turning downright venomous and black. Without warning, he grabs me. A gasp tears from my throat as he roughly spins me around and slams me against the windows behind me. His fists press to the glass on either side of my head as he looms over me. The searing intensity of his gaze is overwhelming, his breath hot against my skin.

His lips hover just over mine, the inches between us crackling with electricity. “How do you want me, Freya?” he growls, his voice low and dangerous. “Tell me how.”

I want to fall into the suffocating heat between us, to let the thick, tension consume me. I want to lose myself in him.

“However you want,” I murmur, my voice shaky but resolute. “However you *need*.”

In an instant, Mal's hands wrap tight around my throat. His body presses to mine, every muscle taut with tension, his breath ragged as he hovers above me. His lips ghost over mine, teasing, taunting.

"It's going to *hurt*," he growls, his voice full of dark promise.

My breath catches, and my body trembles with both fear and desire.

I press my hands against his chest, gently pushing him back. Mal grabs my wrists and slams them above my head. The force of his grip sends a shockwave through me, my pulse racing as he pins me firmly against the wall.

"Are you going to force me?" I whisper, my voice trembling, though there's a flicker of darkness inside me too—a part of me that longs for him to take control, to erase all thought, to make me forget everything but him.

His lips twist into a smirk as he leans closer. "Is that the game we're playing?" he murmurs, his voice low and dangerous.

My heart hammers in my chest, my mind at war with my body.

Say no. Walk away.

You need more than this.

But if it's a choice between nothing and something, I already know what I'm going to pick. Because I'm already in too deep.

Too addicted to his darkness.

"*Yes*."

Heat pulses in my core as his fingers tighten around my neck, just enough to remind me who's in control. My back is pressed against the cool glass of the window, the chill biting into my skin even through my clothes, but the heat radiating off Mal burns through everything else.

His thumb strokes the side of my throat. It's a deceptively gentle gesture. There's nothing remotely gentle about Mal tonight. I know he's about to release whatever safety catch he's been holding and finally show me the full depths of his darkness.

“You really want this, Freya?” His voice is low, rough, his breath hot. “Do you honestly know what you’re asking for?”

I try to swallow, but his grip tightens, and my pulse quickens under his hand. My mind is a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts, but my body—God help me—knows exactly what it wants. I don’t care about the consequences right now. I’m addicted to him, to the way he makes me feel like I’m teetering on the edge of danger.

“*I’m still here,*” I whisper, my voice shaky but resolute.

A low growl escapes his throat, and his hand tightens around my neck, pulling me closer to him until there’s barely any space between our bodies.

“*Remember your fucking safe word,*” he rasps viciously, his lips brushing against the shell of my ear.

Neon.

His words sink in, the promise in them both thrilling and terrifying. I don’t back down. I’m too far gone, too wrapped up his dark allure to turn away now.

I’ve always known that he held something dangerous inside him that could break me. Yet here I am—wanting more.

Needing more.

His other hand slides down my side, his fingers digging into my hip with bruising force as he presses me harder against the glass. The coolness of the window contrasted against the heat between us reminds me just how trapped I am—caught between the safety of pulling away and the danger of falling deeper into him.

I tilt my head back, exposing my throat to him, silently inviting whatever comes next. His breath hitches, and for a moment, I think I see vulnerable uncertainty flicker in his eyes. But it’s gone in an instant, replaced by that same relentless, intense need to dominate and to control.

He leans in, his lips brushing over my jawline, teasing, taunting. I can feel the raw hunger radiating off him, the darkness that he’s been keeping at bay

finally being allowed to break free. His teeth graze my skin and I shiver, my heart racing as he takes what he wants, unrestrained.

I know I should want more from him. I should want the vulnerability, the connection. But right now all I want is to drown in him, to let him take whatever he needs from me because, in some twisted way, it feels like the only thing that's real.

His hand slides lower, his grip on me tightening as he growls against my skin. "You're *mine*, Freya. Don't forget that."

The words are rough, savage, and they send a shiver down my spine.

So does what happens next.

He hooks his fingers into the neck of my t-shirt. His muscles bulge as his arm suddenly jerks down, ripping the fabric from my body with a force that stuns me. I blink, choking in surprise.

But Mal is just getting started.

He yanks the shirt the rest of the way off, tossing it aside before his hand brutally returns to my chest. I wince, whining in pain and pleasure together as he roughly cups my breasts, pinching and twisting the nipples through my black lacy bra.

He yanks the bra down, spilling my breasts free before his fingers mercilessly find a nipple again. I cry out as he grabs hold of the barbell through it, twisting until my breath catches and my back snaps rigid as hot electricity zaps through my core.

Suddenly his grip on my throat is guiding me, pushing me down. I drop to my knees on the floor as Mal reaches for his belt. He unbuckles and removes it, his eyes never leaving mine and his hand never leaving my throat.

When he loops the belt around my neck, my eyes bulge.

"*Mal—*"

"You can say that safe word at any time and pray to whatever god you want that I'll fucking listen. Until then, you're my *whore.* Is that understood?"

The pure, unadulterated, unhinged lunacy and sheer power in his tone sucks the air from my lungs.

It also turns my core to molten lava, my thighs clenching tightly as heat floods between them. Then I gasp sharply as the belt tightens around my neck. His hand drops away, and takes the length of the belt in his fist, tugging hard enough to let me feel it cinch tight around my windpipe.

Holy fucking shit.

I've always known Mal had a dark creature inside him. A monster.

A psychopath.

But for the first time I'm seeing it face to face, without a mask.

I'm seeing *all* of him, and it scares the living shit out of me.

It also has my thighs quivering and my nipples tightening to aching points. It has my core flooding my panties with a sticky hot heat and my heart pounding in my ears.

Maybe he really is a psychopath and a monster. But if that's the case, it just means I'm as deranged as he is. Because I fucking *need this*. I *want* the edge. I want to look into the bottom of the abyss and scream in defiance at it.

"Take out my cock."

My hands shake as I reach for him. My fingers brush his warm skin, my eyes sweeping up the grooves of his abs and v-lines as I pop the button of his pants. The zipper follows. My fingers curl into the elastic of his briefs, tugging them and his pants down together.

Fuck. Me. Sideways.

Every time I see this man's cock, my jaw drops. My pulse skips and my mouth literally waters, and same as always, there's a throbbing ache in my core as my thighs clench.

He's fucking *huge*.

“Hands between your legs, inside your pants. I want you to rub your dripping little cunt while I fuck your mouth like a good little slut.”

Sweet fucking god.

My eyes drag from his swollen, heavy cock and up to his fierce gaze.

“*Touch* your fucking pussy,” he growls quietly, tugging on the belt around my neck as if to make his point. I whimper, nodding eagerly as my hands delve into my pants and into the black lace of my panties.

I’m fucking *soaked*.

My fingers slip messily through my folds, rubbing the throbbing nub of my clit as I squirm on my knees in front of him.

“Open your pretty mouth.”

The second I do, the belt tightens, yanking me toward him as Mal pushes his hips forward.

Fuck…

His fat cock pushes past my lips, stretching my jaw wide as his swollen head roughly rams over my tongue and into the back of my throat. I feel myself rebel, gagging a little as Mal invades my mouth. Then he’s pulling back out, allowing me some air as I gasp and whimper, looking up into his steely blue eyes.

“*Good girl*.”

He fucks his cock back into my mouth, pushing deep into the back of my throat. I choke again, sputtering and coughing phlegm all over his cock. When he draws it out again, it’s glistening and wet, a thick line of spit dripping from the head onto my bottom lip.

Mal smiles darkly.

“Such a pretty little slut, on your knees like a good girl.”

I don’t know why I’m like this. I don’t know *why* this turns me into a fucking puddle and makes me yearn to dive even farther, deeper, darker.

But it does.

He does.

And even if this is just raw, unbridled physical lust with nothing else behind it…I already know I'll take it.

Gladly.

Mal's grip tightens on the belt, his other hand sliding into my hair and gripping it in a fist. He grunts as he starts to roughly fuck my mouth, thrusting into it like it's my pussy. Lewd, wet *gluck gluck* sounds fill the room, and spit drips freely from my mouth down my chin and onto my breasts.

My fingers are a blur between my legs, rubbing my clit furiously as the need for more-more-*more* throbs in my core.

Mal throws his head back, his cock swelling even thicker and bigger, the veins throbbing and pulsing as I slobber and moan all over him. I can barely fit half of him in my mouth—that's being generous. Just the same, Mal's abs tighten, a low groan rumbling deep in his chest as he starts to fuck my throat at an insane tempo.

"*Fuck*, Freya," he growls darkly. "You're such a good little slut that you're going to make me come. Stroke my cock. Make me come all over your pretty face."

Fucking HELL.

The raw, primal *need* for this man, to let him use me like his personal little fuck toy, is *insane*—and for a brief second, I question my mental stability and sanity again.

But I can't stop. Don't *want* to stop.

Give me more. Give me your worst. Give me all of you.

I reach up with both hands, sucking on his swollen head with eager, loud slurps as I stroke his slick, pulsing shaft. Mal's eyes turn the color of the North Atlantic, his jaw tight and his mouth a vicious line as he stares right into my eyes.

“Make me come, baby girl,” he growls. “Make me come all over that pretty fucking face.”

His thick cock swells to steel. The veins bulge as his heavy balls draw up tight. I watch almost in slow motion as the head throbs, and when the first hot jet of his cum spurts from it and lands across my open mouth and tongue, I moan.

“*Good fucking girl…*”

The next one splatters over my cheek. Then my nose, then my other cheek, and my chin, and my mouth again; covering me in his cum like a complete whore as I jerk him off onto my face.

With a groan, he slowly pulls away. He releases my hair and the belt, his palms going flat against the glass above me as he slowly catches his breath.

For a second, reality starts to bleed in. I feel my cheeks heat, and I’m about to ask for a towel.

But reality has no place here.

In half a second, he’s grabbing my hair in a fist again. I whimper, feeling myself diving right back into the darkness as he turns and pulls me after him, sending me down onto the floor. My breath becomes ragged and choking as I land on my hands and knees, hearing Mal slowly walk around behind me.

The *schick* sound of a blade being drawn has my throat closing and the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

“*Mal—*”

He suddenly grabs the back of my pants. I feel a sharp tug and a yanking motion and hear the sound of fabric shredding and ripping. It’s only then that I realize what he’s doing.

He’s cutting my fucking pants off with a knife.

I moan as he keeps slicing, yanking, shredding, and ripping, until my pants are basically leg warmers falling down to my knees. A gasp ripples from my

throat as he flips me roughly over onto my back and shoves my knees up to my chest.

Instantly, he's in front of me, spreading my thighs wide and angling his still-swollen, *huge* dick between them. I cry out, biting my lip and tasting his salty cum as Mal slips the blade of his knife under the waist of my Kiki de Montparnasse black lace panties.

With a yank of his muscled arm, the expensive lingerie slices away from me like tissue paper. Mal grins fiendishly, yanking them from my body and bringing them to his face. His eyes lock with mine as he inhales deeply, making me flush darkly. When he pulls them away from his nose, he's got a wild look in his eyes as he runs the fat head of his cock up and down my pussy, pushing it over my swollen clit.

I gasp sharply, choking on a moan as he leans over me, sinking just an inch of his big dick into my wet tightness.

"Open your mouth, whore."

I do. Instantly, he shoves my ruined panties into my mouth, smearing some of his cum over my lips and cheek before he grabs the end of the belt still looped around my neck.

"When I say I've been holding back," he growls, his eyes locked with mine. "I mean it."

Oh fuck…

"So when I say be ready to use your safe word…"

I scream into my panties when Mal suddenly rams every fucking thick inch of his massive cock deep into me, filling me to the point that it feels like the air has been shoved from my lungs.

"*Be ready to fucking use it*. And you'd better pray I feel like listening."

His forearm ripples, his hand yanking tightly on the belt as he draws his thick cock out of my clinging pussy. When he fucks back into me, it's harder, faster, and somehow even deeper than before.

Then he does it again: rougher, savagely.

Viciously.

My eyes roll back as Mal starts to pound even faster, his jaw grinding and his eyes never leaving mine as he draws out and then fucks back into me, over and over.

“Such a pretty little whore, getting fucked on the floor with cum on her face and her panties in her slutty little mouth,” he growls, making me squeal as he rams his cock into me.

He does it again, his heavy balls slapping my ass, followed by his palm smacking my ass cheek. I squeal again, whining and moaning into my panties as he starts to fuck me like a goddamn *animal.*

The lewd, wet sounds of Mal fucking the living shit out of me fill the guesthouse, along with my muffled squeals of pleasure. His muscles bulge, his jaw tight and his eyes wild with a manic, terrifying gleam as he starts to fuck me right into the floor.

My eyes roll back, the combination of pain and pleasure from the *brutal* way he’s fucking me sending me into a headspace I’ve never experienced before. I almost feel like I’m floating as I submit to this man completely, letting him control me in every way.

My body. My pleasure. My fucking *air*.

My vision swims as he tightens the belt, his huge cock ramming into me over and over until all I can see is the possessed icy blue of his eyes. His other hand reaches out to pinch and twist and tug my nipple piercings mercilessly, until the heavenly mix of pleasure and pain threatens to break me in two.

When I start to come, it’s like someone pulling the trigger on a gun. My orgasm comes out of nowhere, reaching out of the haze of dark black pleasure choking me to yank me down into the abyss.

Mal doesn’t even slow. Doesn’t stop. He just keeps pounding into me, bruising my thighs with his as he utterly dominates me.

I shriek, whimpering into the spit-soaked lace of my panties when he suddenly pulls out and flips me roughly onto my front. I cry out at the

rough way he’s manhandling me, wincing when my brutalized nipples drag across the floor.

At the same time, holy *fuck*.

This isn’t sex. This isn’t even fucking.

This is two animals, or *gods*, trying to fuck each other to death. I moan when he grabs my thighs, spreading my legs wide and settling between them. He pushes his gorgeous, thick cock into me from behind, ramming deep as I squeal in pleasure and pain.

He grabs the belt and my hair, yanking my head up as he grunts savagely and pounds into me. He reaches around, grabbing my panties out of my mouth as his hips roll and crash into me.

“Let’s clean that messy fucking face off, my greedy little cockslut.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

I start to come apart at the seams when Mal starts pushing his cum off my cheeks and into my mouth while he keeps fucking me like a wild beast. His huge size rams into me over and over, his fingers pushing salty sweet cum across my tongue as he fucks my mouth with his fingers. His palm slaps my ass hard, again and again, until I’m squealing and sobbing in pleasure, writhing and shuddering on the floor completely unhinged.

“After I come inside this slutty little hole,” Mal growls, pounding into me and slapping my ass again, “I think I’m going to *feed it* to you.”

Reality starts to crack and crumble around me.

“So be a good little slut for me and say *please daddy, can I have your cum?*”

My entire world starts to crack apart, a huge, all-consuming wave of pleasure rearing up to crash over me and drown me in otherworldly pleasure as I choke out the words, my face caving.

“*Please daddy! Can I have your cum?!”*

That’s it. That’s the moment I break.

My whole fucking body spasms and wrenches, twisting and bucking and seizing as I *scream* my release. The orgasm tears through me like a firestorm, utterly destroying me, melting me down to nothing as I collapse on the floor.

Mal roars, fucking my limp, battered body until his fat cock swells and pulses violently, pumping his hot cum deep inside of me.

Holy. Fucking. FUCK.

I'm dimly aware of him pulling slowly out of me. I wince at the soreness that stabs through me. But fuck me, it's a sweet, sweet pain.

Mal gently rolls me onto my back on the floor. For a second, I'm not sure what's happening as he drops down between my legs.

Then I find out.

Oh, shit…

I mewl quietly, my eyes fluttering shut as I feel his tongue drag gently through my battered, swollen, bruised pussy lips. He groans into me, tonguing my aching clit and then pushing his tongue deep into me.

He doesn't give a shit that he just came in there. He just slowly and gently devours me. Ten seconds ago, I would have sworn on my life that I'd need a month to heal and re-sensitize before I could even think about orgasming again.

But a minute into Mal's tongue between my legs, I realize I was wrong.

Very, very wrong.

When I come again, it's a soft, rolling, wave that washes over me, tingling and teasing though my body as he tongues my clit. I'm still shaking and quivering as he slides up between my legs and over me. He holds himself there, his face inches from mine and his piercing eyes cutting deep into me.

Then he kisses me.

Hard.

My eyes fly open in surprise when I feel the warm, salty taste hit my tongue. Then I realize what's happening, and it's quite possibly the hottest fucking thing I've ever dreamed of.

Mal is pushing his own cum from my pussy into my mouth with his tongue.

I mean not even *my* fucked-up mind could have thought up that one.

His tongue wrestles with mine for a moment, our mouths locking before he slowly pulls away.

"I did tell you I was going to feed it to you."

That he did.

That. He. Did.

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26

MAL

THE DREAM always starts the same.

I'm small again—just a boy—standing at the edge of the pool at my family's estate. The night air is thick and suffocating, the smell of blood and smoke mingling into a bitter haze that clogs my lungs.

My hands shake as Uncle Lars shoves the garden hose into my hands.

"We've practiced this, Maleqqi," he growls, his voice tight. He glances behind him, and I watch the glow of fire shade the tense lines of his jaw before he turns back to me.

"Hold onto the drain at the bottom, just like I showed you, so you don't float back up. Keep the hose to your mouth. Breathe in, cover the end, exhale *slowly*, so there aren't any bubbles. Mal…"

I'm staring past him, my face ashen and my heart racing in my little veins as I watch the roof of our house erupt in an explosion of sparks and flame.

"*MAL*!"

My attention snaps back to Uncle Lars.

"Repeat what I just told you!"

I swallow, my pulse racing.

"Jump in the pool, hold the drain at the bottom, breathe through the hose, exhale slowly. No bubbles."

Lars' lips curl into a dark, proud smile as he ruffles my hair. "Good boy," he rumbles quietly. An explosion and more gunfire erupt from behind him, up the garden path near the house.

"I have to go now, Maleqqi."

My eyes snap to his, going wide as the fear claws at me. I reach for him, trying to stop him. But my mother's brother, who's acted like a father to me for years, is so much bigger and stronger.

He stops me with a firm shake of his head.

"I need you to get in the pool—"

"No!!"

"*YES*!" he roars at me, shaking me to my core. He never yells at me. He's stern, and he can raise his voice at times. I've seen him yell at other people plenty of times. But never at me.

It makes me realize how serious this is.

"*Please*, Mal," he hisses. "Do as I say, okay? I have to go, but I *will* be back. I promise."

I nod, swallowing thickly as smoke and ash drift down onto the surface of the pool behind me. More gunfire erupts back toward the house, followed by the sound of men screaming.

"Now, Maleqqi!!"

Uncle Lars hugs me tightly. Then, without any preamble, he lifts me up and shoves me backward.

I hit the water with a splash, the coldness of it making my lungs seize up for a moment. But then I remember what he taught me to do in the event of something just like this. I grab the hose, and my eyes lift to my uncle's.

"*Down*!" he hisses. I nod, slipping under the surface as he turns, pulls out a gun from his jacket, and bolts back toward the house.

At the bottom of the pool, I do as I was told. I slip my small fingers into the drain grate at the bottom, holding myself down. I bring the hose to my

mouth, sucking the first few inches of water out before the principles of a suction syphon kick in, bringing in air tinged with the scent of smoke from up top.

My chest is tight. Through the ripples in the water, I see flashes and explosions above, fire and death and screams. I heard the muffled sounds of thunder and staccato gunfire.

I don't know how long I stay down there. Long enough for my fingers and toes to turn wrinkly. Long enough that my eyes sting horribly from the chlorine.

When I finally surface, gasping for air, the world is eerily silent.

Deathly still.

My family is gone. Every last one of them.

Their bodies lie crumpled and lifeless, scattered like broken porcelain dolls in pools of blood around the burning, crumbling home I grew up in. My mother and sister are both naked and face down, their hands bound behind their backs.

It'll be years before I realize just how horrific their last moments were.

All of our soldiers are dead. The housekeeper is also naked, tied like my mother and sister. The groundskeeper, beheaded. Arnold, our butler, along with the rest of the household staff—summarily shot against the side of the garage.

For a while, hope flickers in my chest that Uncle Lars made it out, because I can't find his body anywhere.

Then I realize what the charred, shapeless thing hanging by a coil of wire from the fire-blackened flagpole is, and I understand how alone I really am.

They're all gone.

Every single one.

The taste of their death lingers on my tongue like poison, bitter and acrid. As I stare at the horrific carnage, I make an oath to myself: I'll never hide

again.

I'll never be that weak again.

The scene shifts, like it always does. The shadows lengthen, the bodies fade away, and I'm left alone, drowning in silence. Always alone.

I jolt awake, my body drenched in sweat, my heart pounding violently. My chest heaves as I try to steady my breath, but the familiar rush of adrenaline has already taken over. The dream lingers, clinging to me like bitter, choking smoke.

It's always the same nightmare. Always that night.

I sit up, rubbing a hand over my face to push the images away. Outside, the sunlight is fading, casting long shadows across the room. I've been drifting further and further into the night, sliding into a nocturnal rhythm without even realizing it.

The darkness feels more natural. More…comfortable.

But I know the real reason I've been avoiding the daylight. It's because of her.

Freya.

Her name swirls in my mind, a reminder of just how complicated all this has become.

Freya Holm is Freya *Lindqvist*, daughter of the monster who destroyed everything I'd ever known. Who burned my home, raped my mother and sister, killed my family.

That's the blood the runs through the veins of the woman I've become almost irrevocably entangled with.

And I don't know what happens next.

The house feels too quiet as I make my way downstairs. The dream is starting to fade as I walk the quiet path back to the main house. But the remnants of it still cling to my skin, making everything feel heavier.

I find Hana in the kitchen, sitting with a cup of tea, scrolling on her phone. She looks up when I enter, her sharp eyes sizing me up.

“Late night?” she asks, her voice carrying that edge I’ve come to expect from her.

I grunt in response, grabbing a mug and sticking it under the instant espresso machine. Once the water bubbles and froths out the sweet, sweet caffeine, I bring the mug to my lips and lean against the counter, still trying to shake off the last of the nightmare.

“So…”

I take a slow sip and then raise my eyes to my cousin.

“Yes?” I ask, trying to sound casual and failing utterly.

She arches a manicured, unimpressed eyebrow, her hawklike eyes dissecting me as she smooths a perfectly straight lock of bleach blond hair behind her ear.

“What’s going on with you and Freya?” she asks bluntly.

I take another slow sip of coffee, not meeting her gaze. “Nothing.”

“Mal,” Hana sighs, setting her cup down with a clink. “I’m not stupid. I sent her to your place last night.”

My grip on the mug tightens, but I don’t respond.

“And then I saw her stumble *back* to the main house an hour and a half later, looking like you’d just beaten the shit out of her. But the thing is,” she continues sharply, eying me, “I know you, and I can’t imagine you beating up a woman. Which means…” She clears her throat, smirking. “*Yeah*.”

“Am I supposed to know what *yeah* means?”

She rolls her eyes. “For fuck’s sake, Mal. I know you’re sleeping with Freya.”

I frown as I glance up at her. “What makes you say that?”

Hana leans back in her chair, eying me like I'm a moron. "*I* dunno, dummy. The fact that she staggered out of your house an hour and a half after walking in, bow-legged and wearing one of your hoodies instead of the clothes she wore going in? The fact that she had this 'just been fucked' look on her face—"

"Jesus, Hana," I scowl.

She snickers. "More importantly, I'd say it was the slightly crestfallen, sad look on her face."

God, I hate the stabbing feeling I get in my chest when she says that part.

"Huh," I grunt.

"Exactly. *Huh*," Hana throws back. "So what the fuck happened? I don't think you smacked her around, but *something* happened to make her look that upset."

The truth is, I *don't* know what happened with Freya last night. One moment, I was having—bar none—the most explosive, hardcore, fucking *insane* sex of my life with a very, very willing partner. A partner who was completely aware of my emotional limitations and knew what last night was.

The next moment, it was over, I could barely walk or think, and Freya was asking for a sweatshirt. I gave her mine, then went to get us water, and when I got back, she was gone.

The confusing thing is, I might have implied at the start of it all that leaving afterward was expected.

But once she *had* gone, I wanted her to come back.

I'd wanted her to stay.

And I *hated* that she'd walked out.

Hana sighs, her frustration palpable. "You don't have to keep pushing everyone away, you know. Freya's not the enemy."

I turn away from her, my jaw set. "It's…complicated."

“Probably isn’t,” Hana tosses back. She gets up from her chair, her voice softer. “Mal, why do you keep thinking you have something to prove to this family? You’re in it. You’re a Mori. You don’t have to prove shit to us.”

The words hit harder than I’d like to admit, but I keep my face neutral. Hana’s always been perceptive, always seen inside my head in ways no one else can. But she doesn’t know the half of it.

She doesn’t know the full truth about what haunts me.

“Look,” she says, grabbing her coat from the back of the chair. “If you’re this twisted up about Freya, maybe it’s because you, I don’t know, *actually* care about her.”

Fuck.

She could be right.

And that’s the most dangerous truth of all.

THE HOUSE IS TOO STILL after Hana leaves. The quiet only amplifies one particular memory I’ve been trying to bury. But the dream—the *nightmare*—has dragged it back to the surface.

I close my eyes, letting the images flicker to life again. The night my family was murdered is burned into my mind, seared so deep it’s a scar I’ll never shake. The fire, the blood, the cold water enveloping me in the pool.

And then, *him*.

It was after I’d found them all dead and spent hours circling the burning house, stepping over blood and bodies, trying to find a way to fix it all.

That’s when I saw him—a figure with dark hair, dressed in black, standing on the edge of the chaos by the far fence of our property, watching unblinkingly.

For years, I thought it was a hallucination. A ghost or a demon conjured up by my fractured mind, desperate for someone—*anyone*—to be there. There was a time in my early teens when I dabbled with religion, and wondered if who I'd seen had been the Devil himself.

I know better now.

It was Kir Nikolayev.

I just don't know why he was there.

I've gone through every possible scenario. But none of them makes sense. Uncle Lars did *some* business with the Bratva, but not with anyone as high up as Kir. Even if he had, how would Kir have gotten to Norway so fast? I mean, the house was still on fucking fire when I saw him.

He wasn't there out of concern for either business or people.

He was there to *watch*.

And the question *why* has been gnawing at me for years.

Was he there during the massacre itself? Did he stand by while my family was slaughtered? Worse… Did he orchestrate it?

Participate in it?

The thought twists like a knife in my gut. It has for years, but there's an extra edge to it now.

I pull out my phone, my fingers shaking as I dial a number I haven't used in years.

The extra edge is *Freya*, and the fact that I care more than I should for the woman who's essentially Kir's adoptive daughter.

And that's the reason I'm calling Oren.

When he picks up, I don't waste any time. I've worked with him before, and I know he's the best. I also know he works quickly and efficiently and doesn't need any fluff. Just the facts.

It’s me,” I say, my voice low. “I need information on Kir Nikolayev, specifically anything that ties him to the Lindqvists.”

Oren clears his throat. “Good to hear from you, Mal,” he grunts. “It’s been a while.”

“That it has,” I growl back. “When can you get this to me?”

He’s silent for a second.

“Oren—”

“What happened to your family… It was over twenty years ago, Mal.”

“*And*,” I hiss quietly.

“And we’ve known each other for, what, going on six years or so?”

“That’s about right. Does this sermon have a conclusion approaching any time soon, Oren?”

“Why *now*,” he growls. “You could’ve asked me this six years ago.”

“Why the fuck does it matter?”

“Because I’m not a robot, Mal,” he mutters back. “And one of the reasons I’m still doing this job, even now that I’ve got a family to worry about, is that the *why* matters. Even if it doesn’t matter to you, it sure as fuck does to me. So—do I need to ask again?”

I don’t immediately answer. Oren sighs.

“Look, no disrespect, Mal, but without a why, I can’t do this—”

“A girl,” I finally growl quietly. “I’m involved with a girl connected to Kir, who was maybe involved with the Lindqvists, and I need to know how all of that—”

“You’re with Freya Holm.”

I stiffen instantly, words failing me.

Oren just chuckles quietly.

“I’m very good at what I do, Mal. I don’t generally like to indulge in hubris, but I might be the *best* at what I do.”

Yeah, no shit.

“For what it’s worth,” he goes on, “that’s just one of about a million secrets inside my head, any one of which could be very dangerous to various people, that I don’t *ever* plan on sharing with anyone. So, you can relax.”

He coughs.

“Give me a week or two. I’ll see what I can dig up connecting Kir to the Lindqvist family, or what happened to yours.”

I nod slowly. “Thanks, Oren.”

“Be well, Mal.”

I hang up, my pulse racing. I’m walking a dangerous tightrope here. Investigating someone as powerful as Kir could get me killed. That’s partly why I didn’t do it before.

But now, I have an even bigger reason.

The truth is clawing its way to the surface. And once I uncover it, there’s no going back.

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27

FREYA

THE DISTANCE between us is unbearable, but I'm trying not to admit that.

It's been days since I've seen Mal, and his absence feels like a slow, creeping ache. It's ridiculous, really. But no matter how I try to push him out of my mind, the memory of the other night keeps pulling me back.

Or rather, *dragging me back*, by the hair, and then fucking me into oblivion.

Whatever that was with him that last time was fucking *insane*. I've been sore and covered in bruises for days. My wardrobe suddenly exclusively features turtlenecks, hoodies with the hoods bunched up around my neck and scarves, to cover the marks from what looks like a fucking chain and tire iron attack to my neck.

I had to tell Hana I fell awkwardly getting out of the bathtub. For fuck's sake, I've been wearing *pantyliners* because of how fucking raw my poor pussy still is.

And yet?

…*Worth it*. All. Fucking. Worth. It. Best sex of my life. Okay, that's a low-to-non-existent bar. But I'd venture to say best sex of *anyone's* life.

If you're into playing rough, that is. Really, *really* fucking rough.

Like, the sort of rough I should *maybe* be a little more scared of, given how unhinged Mal is.

I could lie to myself and say that's why I've kept my distance since that night. But that's not even the littlest bit true. It's not because I'm scared of *him*.

I'm scared of *me*. I'm scared of what this all means to me.

I'm the one who left the other night. After the sex, and after he'd given me a hoodie and gone to get water, I ran. Or more like staggered, wincing, back to the main house.

I had to.

Mal made it perfectly clear before any of that happened that what we had wasn't going to be anything serious. No strings, no complications. No emotions. He's "not capable of that", I believe his words were.

And I told myself I was fine with that. I *am* fine with that. I'm not some lovesick girl pining for more, not from a dangerous, emotionally screwed-up man who's possibly—or probably—a psychopath.

I mean…why *can't* it just be fun? Why can't I just enjoy him and the frankly life-altering sex without wanting more? He makes me feel incredible, and fucks like a *god* with the Devil's cock.

I refuse to be "that girl." The one who gets attached. I'm smarter than that. Stronger than that.

Besides, I should be staying a continent away from someone like Mal. So the fact that the opportunity here is to be able to sleep with him without any strings binding me to him?

That's arguably for the best. No mess, no heartbreak, just...whatever this is.

Casual, highly addictive, but nothing more.

…Aside from possibly *lethal*.

I stare down at my phone, my fingers hovering over the screen, tempted to text him asking what he's doing tonight. Or, like, *now*.

I know I shouldn't—I'm the one who walked away—but the urge is maddening. A tight knot of frustration and longing twists inside me, pulling

at my resolve.

No. If Mal wants it, he can make the first move. I *won't* chase him. I can't.

With a frustrated sigh, I toss the phone onto the couch beside me. The room is quiet, the silence pressing in around me.

Kir and Isaak are back in New York, but I've stayed in Kyoto longer than I planned. I keep telling myself it's for Annika. But deep down, I know *it's because of him.*

Because although Annika and Kenzo are still around, there's a ton of lovey-dovey shit radiating from them. With my own emotions in such a tangled mess of confusion and darkness, it's a weird vibe to be around. So I've been avoiding them.

I lean back against the couch, staring at the ceiling with the strange sense of melancholy that's been following me around for days settling heavily in my chest.

My phone lights up on the couch next to me, pulling my attention to the text that just popped up.

CAIN

Hi Freya! It's Cain. We met at that ramen place in New York. I borrowed your phone charger.

I grin widely as I type a reply.

ME

OMG, of course I remember you! Hi!

CAIN

Hi!!! Sorry, I have no idea what time it is in NYC. I hope I'm not waking you.

ME

Lol, I keep weird hours. Also, I'm not in New York right now. How's it going?

CAIN

Good! But I have this encryption problem I can't crack. Then I thought of you and thought…why not ask?

CAIN

Up for a challenge? I mean only if you have the time. I'm totally hitting my head against this one.

ME

Sure! Feel free to send it over and I'll take a look.

CAIN

OMG, you're the best!!

I grin, reaching for my laptop. Cain's email arrives instantly, with the encryption data and algorithm attached. I go into sleuth mode, booting up the code and giving it a quick look to see if anything jumps out.

CAIN

Seriously, thank you. I'm not technically supposed to be sharing this, BTW, so shh. But I'm close to the deadline for this job and I'm stumped.

My eyes backtrack to a command line, rereading the code a few times. I pause and my bottom lip retreats between my teeth as I switch up what I think *might* be a syntax error and add in an extra line of code just to be sure.

ME

I MIGHT have figured it out. One sec, running a stress test on it.

CAIN

WTAF!?! You are a QUEEN. Thank you!!

ME

No prob! Test is running now. Should take five minutes.

CAIN

I seriously owe you. For real, you have no idea how much you've just saved my ass.

ME

Lol, been there, girl. A hundred times. My pleasure.

CAIN

So where are you if you're not in NYC?

I blow air through my lips.

That, new internet friend, is a long story.

ME

It’s…complicated. Short version: my friend married a Japanese guy, and I’m over here living with them for a while.

CAIN

OMG! You’re in Japan?! I’m back too, in Tokyo!

ME

Kyoto!

CAIN

Amazing! I love Kyoto, it’s gorgeous there. We should meet up while you’re still here!

ME

Yes! That would be awesome!

My laptop dings. I glance at it and grin before I attach the updated code and email it back to Cain.

ME

Code headed your way. Stress test says all clear.

CAIN

THANK YOU!!!

She finishes her text with about a million happy face, heart, confetti and champagne emojis. Then we reiterate that we HAVE to meet up while I’m still in Japan.

A small smile tugs at the corner of my mouth. Cain’s banter and needing my help has grounded me a little, compared to earlier. Later that evening, I retreat to my room for a scheduled video call with Kir and as the screen flickers to life, the familiar sight of his face further easing the tension that’s been building in my chest. His sharp blue eyes focus on me, his expression as composed as ever.

“How are things over there?” Kir asks.

“Busy,” I reply, trying to muster a smile. “I’ve been reviewing the quarterlies for Flux Logistics.”

Kir’s brow arches at the mention of the latest company to fall in his crosshairs. Yes, the Nikolayev Bratva is a criminal organization. But that

doesn’t mean it’s *exclusively* criminal. Kir is very, very good at layering his illegal activities and income between legitimate endeavors, which hides his criminality quite well. Flux Logistics, a Baltimore-based shipping company, is a perfect acquisition target for him: a legitimate company that’s *already* a front for a smuggling operation. The purchase price includes the actual shipping company, which turns a good profit, as well as the muscle and connections with the smuggling operation.

“And?” Kir asks, amusement and excitement in his voice that he can’t quite hide.

“Their numbers check out.”

“*But.*…?”

He’s smirking. He already knows what I would find on the current owner. He just needed me to find the proof of it for leverage.

“Yeah… He’s fucking the nanny. They meet twice a week at his offices once the wife takes the kids back from her.”

Kir smiles. “And would this be the thirty-five-year-old nanny, or the—”

“You know perfectly well that it’s the one who’s nineteen.”

“God, I’m going to enjoy fucking him with this. Good work, Frey. Seriously. That wasn’t an easy find. He was cautious.”

I grin. What can I say? I’m a sucker for genuine, nice compliments, especially from someone I respect, like Kir.

But even as we discuss business, my thoughts keep drifting to Mal, to the strange distance between us that I can’t seem to bridge, the wall between us that I don’t know how to break through.

“Everything else all right?” Kir’s brow furrows slightly as he studies me.

I pause, debating whether I should tell him what’s been bothering me.

Are you fucking high?

I clear my throat, forcing a smile. “I’m fine,” I say quickly. “Just a little tired. It’s nothing.”

Kir gives me a long, searching look, but eventually nods. “Make sure you take care of yourself. Oh—have you talked with Damian recently?”

Not as recently as I’d like, but Damian and I *have* been talking pretty regularly since I got to Japan.

“Maybe two days ago?”

Kir sighs. “Well, he’s got it into his head that he wants to come visit.”

I snort. “Let me guess, someone’s still pissed that they were in a coma when Kenzo married their pseudo-sister and now he wants to come over and shit on the lawn about it?”

Kir throws his head back in a big laugh. “That about sums it up.”

“Won’t *that* be fun.”

He grins. “Give him a call. I doubt you’ll convince him not to come, but maybe you can take the pressure down a bit before he goes over there and does something reckless.”

“Hey, he’s *your* nephew.”

“Oh, and he *so* listens to me,” Kir mutters sarcastically.

I giggle. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Annika and I had plans for some late-night hangouts later. But when she’s completely MIA, and when Kenzo is *also* MIA, I can add two and two together and get “fucking each other’s brains out”. I’m smart like that.

So instead, I end up on one of the patios, aimlessly doom-scrolling Instagram. It’s a bad habit—one that both Annika and Hana constantly tease me about. But sometimes it’s easier to get lost in other people’s lives than deal with your own.

I pause when I see a new post from Takeshi.

Dammit.

I’ve been fastidiously *not* going back to that particular photo of Mal at the club with Tak, because it pisses me off in a way that confuses me. The mere

thought of *that fucking girl* sitting on his lap is enough to drive my internal temperature up in a supremely stabby way.

And that's confusing.

I mean for one, what Mal and I have isn't a "relationship". It's an arrangement. Or I guess it *was* an arrangement—one based on a blackmail threat. Now it's just…a different *kind* of arrangement? One based on me being addicted to fucking him? But also having feelings for him I can't, or am scared, to put into words?

Pretty much.

Either way, it's just now hitting me that we never had any sort of conversation about exclusivity. And yet, Mal's behavior—i.e., *flying back to the US from fucking Japan* and beating up a guy for me—would suggest otherwise.

Like I said: it's confusing. It's also why I've tried to not look at the goddamn picture again.

So much for that.

I flick to Tak's profile, scroll through a bunch of newer posts involving motorcycles and parties, and finally find the rage-inducing post itself.

I glare at the somewhat blurry pic again, grinding my teeth as I look past Takeshi to where Mal is sitting with *that fucking girl* on—

I frown, stiffening as I take a better look at the skank on his lap.

What the FUCK?

My stomach twists. I take a screenshot of the post, then go into my gallery and zoom in.

Holy shit.

It's *Mia*, the household help that Kir fired back in New York for constantly flirting with him.

Just to be sure, I do a reverse image search on the zoomed-in photo. Sure enough, it comes back with a link to *her* Instagram.

I stare at the profile, incredulous, then glance back at the photo of her on Mal's lap.

What the *fuck* is Mia doing in Kyoto? And what the fucking *fuck* is she doing sitting on Mal's lap like she belongs there?

A tidal wave of jealousy and anger crashes over me as I scroll through her profile. Mia's most recent posts show that she *is*, in fact, living in Kyoto now, working at a hostess club as a cocktail waitress.

There's no *way* this is a coincidence.

I need answers.

THE NEON LIGHTS of Shimogyo Ward flash above me, the bike I borrowed from Takeshi rumbling to a stop beneath me as I cut the engine. The city hums around me, the air thick with the smell of sweat, smoke, food, and alcohol.

I glance up at the blinking neon sign for Club Heartbreaker, a high-end, exclusive "Hostess Club".

Japan is full of these. The guests are male, with female staff, although there's clubs going in the opposite direction cropping up too these days. Basically, businessmen-types can come in and sit and drink with gorgeous, younger women who are great at conversation, or have specialized knowledge on certain subjects, or are just good at making their clients feel like rock stars.

They're *not* brothels. There's no touching or anything like that, and nobody's stripping. They're literally just places to go and pay someone to be your friend for the night.

Japan has a serious loneliness problem.

My heart pounds as I push open the club's door, the dim lighting and upbeat jazz music washing over me. I scan the room, searching for Mia.

It doesn’t take long.

She’s working the floor, weaving through tables with a tray of drinks in hand. Her eyes meet mine from across the room, and I see the flicker of confused recognition followed by a sharp jolt of panic right away.

Yeah, she knows why I’m here.

She swallows, glancing around nervously as I approach.

“Ms. Holm,” Mia says, her voice quiet. “I don’t want any trouble—”

“We need to talk,” I say icily.

Mia shifts uneasily, her eyes darting around. “I’m working—”

“It won’t take long,” I snap, stepping closer.

She hesitates, then sighs, swallowing nervously as she sets her tray down. “Look, I didn’t follow you or Annika to Kyoto, okay?”

“Now *why* would you assume I’d think that?” I say pointedly.

Mia gives me a look, suddenly dropping all pretenses. “Okay, I get that you don’t like me. I hit on Kir, and you’re like, I don’t know, jealous about that?”

I make a face. “*Hardly*. I just don’t like seeing gold diggers trying to hook their claws into him. He’s like a father to me.”

She nods glumly, looking away. “Well, first of all, I’m not a fucking gold digger.” She shrugs. “I thought he was hot, sue me.”

“He was your *boss*.”

She sighs, giving me a look. “Is there another reason besides me taking a shot with Kir that you don’t like me? If you’re curious why I’m here, my cousin is in Kyoto for a study abroad semester and I wanted to come visit her. Japan makes it *really* hard to get a work visa, but this place…” She clears her throat, lowering her voice and glancing around. “Well, there’s a market in hostess bars for blonde American *gaijin*. And this place is willing to pay under the table to satisfy it.”

Mia sighs heavily, shooting me a look.

“Can I please get back to work now? I’m not trying to steal your daddy, okay? I’m just working, and I need to—”

“What’s going on between you and Mal?”

Her brows knit. “Who?”

“Mal Ulstäd.”

Mia gives me a look. “Freya, not gonna lie, I have no fucking idea who that is.”

My anger surges as I open my phone to the saved screenshot of Takeshi’s post and shove it under her nose. “Ring any fucking bells?”

She stares at the picture briefly before slowly raising her eyes to me.

“Freya, you understand how these places *work*, right? Guys come in, they spend money, they buy bottles, they get pretty girls to sit with them and laugh at their dumb jokes and tell them how fascinating they are, and *that’s it*. The next night, a whole new crowd of lonely guys with money comes in. Rinse, repeat—”

“You’re actually going to tell me you have no idea who the guy is who came in with his cousin Takeshi Mori, of the Mori-kai Yakuza? The same Takeshi Mori who happens to own a controlling interest in *this very bar*?”

Mia’s face falls.

“The *same Takeshi Mori*, actually,” I smile, batting my eyelashes, “who’s *the very guy* paying you under the table to work here? That still not ringing any—”

“Okay, okay! *Jesus*!” Mia blurts, flustered. “Seriously, I don’t want anything to do with any of this shit, okay? I just want to make some spending money, hang with my cousin for a semester in a hella cool foreign city, and go home. That’s *it*, Freya.” She frowns and glances at the picture again. “Fine, you want to know what’s going on with him and I?” Mia sighs. “It’s not what you think. Like, at all.”

“Then enlighten me, Mia.”

She looks away, shoving her hand through her blonde hair before sighing and turning back to me. “He wanted information about Kir.”

I frown. “Excuse me?”

“That’s literally it. He’s been in a few times. And that is *all* he ever wants to talk about: Kir Nikolayev.”

“What *about* Kir?”

Mia shrugs. “Anything. Like, anything I can remember about working for him. Where I remember him traveling to. He was *really* curious to know if he’d ever been to Norway. Something about a Link family?”

I stiffen. “Excuse me?”

“Link-something. It was super Norwegian sounding. Link-mist…Link-twist…”

“Lindqvist?”

Her face lights up. “That was it!” She sighs. “But I have no idea who the fuck that is, and I told him as much.” Mia glances over to a lively table of Japanese salesman in suits. “Look, as fun as this has been, I really do need to work, okay?”

I nod, my head spinning as I glance at her. “Sure.” I frown. “Thanks, Mia.”

I turn and head out, almost more confused than I was when I walked in.

“Freya—wait.”

Mia is stepping out the front door after me. She bites her lip, clearly conflicted before she finally speaks.

“Look, for what it’s worth, Mal didn’t ‘want me’, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I frown, feeling my face flush. “What?”

“You like this guy, yeah?”

My cheeks burn hotter. “I never said that.”

She smirks, rolling her eyes. “*Right*. Well, trust me—I know men, and when they want me. Him?” She shakes her head. “He didn’t. Take that how you will.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I just give her a small smile. Mia gives me one last look before slipping back into the club, leaving me standing outside, my mind racing.

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MAL

I LEAN against the side of the house as the line of motorcycles roar down the driveway to the main gate. My jaw grinds as I watch the taillights of Freya's bike, following Tak, Hana, and Annika as they head out for an evening joyride through the hills surrounding Kyoto.

I was out here when they suited up. When Hana asked if I was joining, I glanced at Freya, who was carefully ignoring me, and then turned back to tell my cousin, no, not this time.

It's been like this since that night she came to my guesthouse. The night where I took off the reins and forgot about the brakes.

I won't say she saw my *full* monster that night. No one sees that unless I'm about to kill them.

Slowly. Methodically.

But she got fucking close. Closer than anyone ever has before. And she didn't just see the monster, either. She *enjoyed it*. She begged for it. She urged me on, wanting more of it.

I don't need a psychiatric assessment to know that I am *profoundly* fucked in the head. Watching your family, your home, and your whole world get torn to shreds and burned alive as a child has a way of setting you down a not-so-normal path. Being ripped from those ashes and thrust into the claws of a Nazi psychopath hell bent on twisting you and others into his personal army of hate doesn't exactly help, either.

Killing your grandfather in cold blood at the age of eleven probably seals the deal.

And *that* is the blackness inside me that Freya got a peek at the other night.

Then she ran, and she hasn't come back or even looked at me since.

I've spent days wondering if I pushed it too far. If I went far past any games she wanted to play. If I showed her too big of glimpse of the monster inside of me.

She should have used her fucking safe word. The few times I've seen her since, I've wanted to grab her and shake and scream in her face, asking why she didn't.

But we're past that now, and in whatever dead zone this is.

I scowl as the four bikes peel away from the Mori estate. I'd say Freya barely looked at me when she walked out to join them, but she could well have been staring me in the face and I wouldn't have known. Since they were going out before sundown, Hana helped her get kitted out in full riding gear almost like a racer would wear, covering her from chin to toe. She had a black-out helmet on, too.

But I'm sure she didn't look at me. I'm fairly certain I'd have felt it if she had, even through the visor.

I'm about to head back inside when I hear the roar of an engine careening up the driveway. I turn to see Kenzo's Porsche come flying up the hill before he screeches to a stop and springs out of the car.

Something's wrong. Kenzo's face is lined with anxiety, his eyes darting around the yard as if searching for something.

"What's going on?" I growl, worry in my tone.

"*Where is she*?!" Kenzo snaps coldly.

"Who, Annika?" I frown, nodding past him in the direction he just came. "You just missed them."

"*What*?"

A cold sensation creeps up my spine when I see the pure fear explode behind his eyes.

“She, Hana, Tak, and Freya just took off on bikes. They’re headed up the mountain road toward Sakamoto Castle—Kenzo!”

My cousin bolts back to his car, lunging behind the wheel and revving the engine to a roar. Before he can leave, I’m jumping into the passenger seat next to him.

Whatever the fuck is going on, my usually stoic, unshakable cousin looks scared to death about Annika.

And Annika is with *Freya*.

Kenzo whips around to shoot me a look. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Coming with you,” I growl.

“Buckle up.”

My back flattens against the seat as Kenzo roars down the driveway, past the guards at the front gate, and out onto the mountain road.

“What the fuck is going on, Kenzo?” I hiss as I do up my seat belt.

“Leka.”

My stomach drops at the name.

Leka as in *Valon* Leka, the Albanian psychopathic fucker that I know Freya and Annika once worked for.

Except Valon is *dead*. A week ago, that fuckhead Ulkan Gacaferi used Valon as bait to draw Kenzo and Tak to that house in the Kamigyo Ward where they were attacked. Tak got away…and Kenzo was kidnapped before Annika and I got him back in one piece…and now Valon is fucking *dead*. I saw the blood at the house, from Ulkan cutting him up. The police found his fucking *body*, for fuck’s sake.

“*How*?” I hiss, glancing at Kenzo.

He grits his teeth as we roar at breakneck speed around the twisting mountain roads toward Sakamoto Castle, the tourist spot where Freya, Annika, Tak, and Hana were headed.

“Chief Hajime was paid off,” he spits. “I just came from the precinct.” He sends me a terrified look. “They never found Leka’s body at all.”

“*Fuck*,” I snarl. “And he’s *alive*?!”

I clench my fists.

Valon is alive. Kenzo is worried Valon’s after Annika.

And Freya is with her.

My jaw tightens as Kenzo pushes the car faster, the forest around us blurring into streaks of green and black. My mind races, images of Freya flashing through my head—her smile, her laugh, the fire in her eyes. The way she pushes me, challenges me, makes me want things I’ve spent my life avoiding.

In this moment, the fear of losing her is all-consuming.

“Let’s just say he’s not confirmed dead,” Kenzo hisses, gripping the wheel a little tighter as he glances to me. “That’s enough for me to worry when my wife goes for a drive and doesn’t answer her—”

“KENZO!”

I see the skid marks on the road first. Then the twisted, wrenched metal. Kenzo swears, spinning the wheel to the side and slamming on the brakes. I grit my teeth, gripping the handle of the door as the Porsche goes up on two wheels. The smell of burned rubber fills the air as he jerks the wheel back, getting us back onto four wheels before the car comes to a shuddering stop inches from the mangled pile of wrecked motorcycles.

Oh God…

For a moment, all I can see is fire. All I can smell is smoke as my home burns, mixed with the coppery scent of my family’s blood in the air and the taste of the garden hose in my mouth.

“ANNIKA!”

Kenzo’s roar rips me from the black hole of my past. I lurch out of the car, bolting over to where he’s crouched next to a mangled neon pink, purple, and black bike, the one Annika’s been riding since she got to Kyoto.

Fuck.

“Kenzo!”

Just as my panic soars into the stratosphere, I hear Takeshi’s voice behind us. We both whirl and I see my cousin limping out of the underbrush at the side of the road, bleeding from the shoulder. He’s got his arm around Hana, who’s clutching a hand to a bad cut on her forehead.

FUCK.

Kenzo and I bolt over to them, helping Tak lower Hana to the ground.

“They took her!” Hana blurts, her wide, terrified eyes lifting to Kenzo. “Kenzo, they took Annika!”

“*Who* did?!”

“Leka!” Takeshi grimaces. “Kenzo, that fucker is still alive, and he’s got Sota’s business manager Tengen with him.”

It’s not that I’m not worried about Annika. I am.

But there’s someone else filling my every thought as I whip my head around, my eyes darting everywhere, looking for a single trace of her.

Where the fuck is Freya.

My eyes dart back to the bike she was riding, lying mangled and half twisted around the guardrail.

“They side-swiped us with a van, took us all out, and then dragged Annika into it—”

“Freya!”

The name rips from my throat, haggard and tense. Hana's eyes whip to mine, worry etched across her face as she points at the guardrail that the bike is wrapped around.

"She went over!"

I don't hear anything after that. My body moves on instinct, sprinting across the road, leaping over the guardrail, skidding down the embankment, crashing through branches and underbrush.

"Freya!" I shout, my voice hoarse, cracking with fear. "Freya! Answer me!"

No response. No movement. Just suffocating silence.

I run faster, tearing through the trees, ripping through the underbrush, my breath coming in ragged gasps. I can't think, can't process anything except the need to find her. My eyes dart around wildly, searching for any sign that tells me she's alive.

Then I see it.

The other half of her bike, twisted and mangled, resting against a tree. And just a few feet away, slumped beneath the shadows of the branches, I see her.

"*Freya*."

I breathe her name as I rush toward her. My knees hit the dirt as I drop beside her, my hands shaking as I touch her face. She's pale, her body curled in on itself as if trying to shield herself from the world.

Her helmet lies cracked open a few feet away. The backs of her hands are red and blistered from the sun where she's clinging to her ripped jacket, trying to keep it wrapped around her. But she's moving.

Her eyes flutter open, and when she sees me, a weak smile tugs at her lips. "Mal..."

I exhale, my chest tightening with relief. She's alive.

Without thinking, I pull off my jacket and throw it over her, shielding her from the sunlight filtering through the trees. I pull her into my arms,

cradling her against my chest. “I’m here,” I whisper, my voice rough with emotion. “I’ve got you.”

Freya’s fingers clutch at my shirt, her body trembling as she leans into me. Her breath is warm against my neck, weak, but steady. “I thought... I thought I was going to—”

“No,” I growl, cutting her off. My grip tightens around her, fierce and protective. “You’re not going anywhere. You can’t.”

I hold her close, my mind already thinking about getting her back to safety and making sure she’s okay. I press my lips to her temple, the words slipping out before I can stop them. “I’m never letting you go.”

With Freya in my arms, I climb back up the embankment, my body running on pure adrenaline. When we reach the top, Kenzo is on his phone, barking orders for backup and medical help. None of it registers.

All I can focus on is her.

Freya is still cradled in my arms, underneath my jacket. Her breathing is shallow, but she’s alive, and that’s all that matters.

My fear hasn’t faded, though. If anything, it’s intensified. The idea of her being taken from me, of her getting hurt again—it terrifies and claws at me in ways I can’t even articulate.

I look down at her, my emotions crashing over me like a tidal wave. I’ve been fighting this—fighting *her*—for so long. Telling myself that she was the blood of the enemy, that I hated her for that. But it’s all a lie.

I care about this woman more than I’ve cared about anyone or anything in a long, long time.

And it scares the fuck out of me.

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MAL

A LOW, tense hum reverberates through my bones as I hold Freya close, her body trembling in my arms in the shadow of a massive drainpipe by the side of the road.

The sun is just about down. Until then, I'm keeping her here.

Safe.

I feel her heartbeat, her chest rising and falling against mine. It's too rapid. Her breath is shallow, her body still trembling from the crash, and no matter how tightly I hold her, it feels I'm seconds away from losing her.

"You found me," she whispers, her voice weak and breathy, her eyes glazed over in exhaustion and pain. Her hands got the worst of it when she went over the guardrail. The backs of them are red and raised with angry burns, as are a few places on her legs and by her shoulder where the branches tore at her clothes before she could scramble under the tree and cover herself.

I grit my teeth, pulling her tighter. I can't say anything—can't form words that would even come close to expressing how I feel inside.

I could have lost her.

The thought sits like a leaden weight in my gut, a cold knife twisting deeper with every fragile beat of her heart.

I could have lost her.

The feeling is unfamiliar. I hate it. I'm not built for vulnerability, not supposed to care this much. Yet here I am, clutching her like a lifeline, terrified that if I let go, the world will swallow her whole.

"Mal," she murmurs, her fingers weakly clutching at my shirt. Her lips twist into a wry smile. "It's okay. *I'm* okay."

But she's not. I know she's not. Seeing her like this—hurt, broken, because I wasn't there to protect her—makes something primal simmer inside me.

Engines roar closer, and I snap my head up, my body tensing. Three SUVs screech to a halt, kicking up dust and gravel as they come to a stop just off the road. A dozen Mori-kai soldiers pour out as Takeshi helps Hana up from the side of the road.

I force myself to let go of Freya, but not before wrapping my jacket around her shoulders, even though the sun is well below the horizon now with twilight cloaking the world. She's still pale, still trembling, but the fire in her eyes hasn't dimmed.

"We need to get you to a hospital," I say, more roughly than I would have liked.

Freya shakes her head, her expression hardening with determination. "I'm not going fucking anywhere."

"Freya—"

"I'm only going to say this once," she snaps. "They have my best fucking friend. I am *not* leaving until we get her back."

I know I won't win this fight. Not when Freya's looking at me like that—like she's ready to march into Hell itself to save Annika.

"Fine," I grind out, my voice tight. "But you're staying close."

WE ROAR down the road in the direction Kenzo's already gone, following the faint skid marks left by the attackers' van. The narrow asphalt winds and

twists through the hills in the direction of Sakamoto Castle, a major tourist spot in the hills north of Kyoto.

It's bizarre that that's where Leka's taken Annika, given how overrun it is with visitors and park officials.

I grip the wheel tightly, pushing the car faster, and glance briefly in the rearview mirror to catch a glimpse of Freya. She's in the back seat, her face pale but set with fierce determination. Her eyes are locked on the road ahead, and her burned hands clench and unclench.

Takeshi's brow is furrowed in confusion. "Why the hell would they go this way? Sakamoto Castle's crawling with tourists and security."

He's right. It makes no sense. And then it hits me—there's only one explanation.

"*Fuck me*," I mutter, pissed that I didn't think of it earlier. "They're not heading to the castle," I grunt. "They're going to the old bunker."

Freya frowns. "I'm sorry, the what?"

"There's an old World War Two bunker entrance not far from here," I explain, meeting her gaze in the rearview mirror. "It's been sealed off for years, but people still sneak in. It's not exactly secure." I glance at Tak. "Hell, Kenzo and I broke into it a bunch of times ourselves when we first moved here."

Freya swallows nervously. "Why is it sealed off?"

"Aside from the random cave-ins, eighty-year-old booby traps, deliberate dead ends, unexploded munitions and, oh, the toxic air that'll kill you if you're in there too long?" Tak grunts next to me. "No reason."

I shoot him a dark look that the asshole misses as Freya pales in the back seat.

"*That's* where Anni is?" she says, her voice full of dread.

"Let's find out."

Not far ahead, I take the turnoff from the main road onto the older, gravel one that winds up to the old Imperial-era bunker system from the Second World War.

We pull up to the bunker entrance, skidding to a stop at the edge of the dense forest that surrounds the weathered, crumbling concrete entrance.

I was right: the attackers' van is parked just outside, and Kenzo's Porsche is nearby. Both are empty.

I jump out of the car, my heart hammering in my chest. My eyes scan the entrance, a gaping black hole in the side of the mountain, half-collapsed and barely visible in the shadows.

Takeshi moves quickly, pulling a gun out of his jacket as he approaches the entrance. Freya jumps out of the car behind me. I turn to tell her to wait here, but I never even get the words out.

"Like *fuck* am I staying put."

…Okay then.

I open the trunk of the SUV and pull another gun out from the hidden compartment under the spare. Tak and I nod at each other, guns ready as we move toward the dark, gaping entrance.

Before we can take another step, a deafening explosion rips through the air. The ground shakes beneath our feet as thick smoke and dust billow out of the entrance, debris hailing down around us like a storm of ash and rock.

I yank Freya back, my body covering hers as the blast sends shockwaves through the trees. My ears ring as I shield her from the blast.

As the dust finally begins to settle, I see that maybe fifteen feet into the entrance, there's now a massive cave-in.

Freya is screaming Annika's name as she scrambles to her feet, calling into the darkness.

There's no answer. Just cold, suffocating silence.

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FREYA

A SMILE LIFTS the corners of my lips as I crack the door open and peer into the hospital room. Kenzo is sleeping again in his hospital bed, Annika curled up against him, her eyes closed and her chest rising and falling softly.

They made it. They're alive. Mostly because my friend is a certified *badass*.

They almost died down there, between the explosion, the poisonous air, and a flood of water. But Annika managed to escape through an old sewage line carrying a near-dead Kenzo on her back. I'm also pretty sure she broke some sort of breath-holding record getting them both out of there.

I shudder when I think how close I came to losing her. But then I allow myself to smile, watching the two of them sleeping together, hand in hand.

It's going to be okay.

The antiseptic scent and the fluorescent lights of the hospital fade into the distance as I step out into the cool night air, my body *crumpling* with exhaustion. My muscles ache, my nerves are frayed, and all I want is to collapse and let go of everything weighing me down.

But as I walk out into the quiet parking lot, I startle as my eyes lock with his.

Mal.

He’s leaning against a black Jeep with the top down, watching me with an intense, unreadable expression. There’s something about his presence that always sends a shiver through me, but after everything, I’m not sure how to process it. I’m not sure how to deal with or even come to grips with what’s between us.

For a moment, neither of us says anything. Then he nods toward the Jeep. “Get in.”

I hesitate, my hands curling to fists, feeling the tightness of the bandages on the backs of them. There’s too much left unsaid, too much hanging in the air between us.

Mal’s gaze sharpens, his jaw clenching like he’s losing patience. Fucking *fuck*, why is that so attractive on him?

“Just get in, Freya.”

His voice cuts through the silence, low and rough, making my heart pound. He’s not asking for a conversation. He’s just driving me home. But there’s still that weight between us as his eyes burn into me, as he commands the space around him without saying a word.

“What happened today... It doesn’t change anything,” I murmur, my voice soft, barely audible.

“I’m not asking for a sermon,” he grunts, pushing away from the car. “I’m giving you a ride.”

For a moment, I think about refusing. But I’m too tired and drained to argue. And despite everything, despite the chaos of the day, I crave his presence. It’s irrational, but I feel steadier when he’s near.

So without another word, I open the door and slide into the passenger seat.

We drive in silence, the unspoken tension hanging heavy as the cool night air ripples through my hair. I sit stiffly, my bandaged hands folded in my lap, my eyes glued to the passing streets.

My body aches from the crash. I’ve got cuts and bruises all over, not to mention the burns on the backs of my hands, my shoulder, and a few on my

legs. The adrenaline that kept me going while we were looking for Kenzo and Annika is now utterly drained, leaving behind a raw vulnerability that I can't shake.

But it's not just the silence. It's the energy between us, simmering beneath the surface, waiting to erupt. I steal a glance at Mal, his hands gripping the steering wheel, his jaw set in that hard, unyielding way that makes him impossible to read.

And then, without warning, one of his hands goes slowly and deliberately to my thigh.

The touch is firm, possessive, his fingers resting just above my knee. It's not "a move". It's not even sexual. It's just comforting. Like he's giving me a bit of his strength, since mine is so obviously failing.

He doesn't look at me, doesn't say a word. But the weight of his hand sends a surge of heat through me. It's a silent claim.

I don't move. I don't want to.

My pulse quickens, the warmth from his hand seeping into my body, igniting something deep inside me. It's dangerous, this pull he has over me, and yet I find myself craving more, wanting more, even when I know I shouldn't.

I try to focus on the road ahead, but my body betrays me. My mind spins with thoughts of what might happen next if I let this go further.

If I *asked him* to go further.

The car slows, and we pull up to the front *tori* style gates of the Mori compound.

We're here.

When we finally stop, my mind is racing, torn between exhaustion and the tension coiling ever tighter between us. I half-expect Mal to say something: to bring up this still undiscussed tension between us that's been simmering since the night I went to him and he almost broke me in the most insanely perfect ways imaginable before I left without a word.

But instead, he silently steps out of the car, comes around to my side and opens the door, my heart skipping a beat when his hand reaches to help me out.

I let him pull me to my feet. Before I can even take a step toward the main house, Mal's hand wraps around mine, guiding me toward the guesthouse.

Oh.

I feel my lip retreat between my teeth. The touch is gentle but insistent.

The unspoken power he holds over me makes my breath hitch. I know I should resist, tell him no, walk away, and keep whatever shred of control I have left. But the truth is, I don't want to. Not after today.

Maybe not ever.

Inside, the dim light casts shadows across the walls, and I can feel my heartbeat quicken as I stand in the entryway. His hand still holds mine, and I'm painfully aware of how close we are, how the air between us feels like it's about to crack beneath with the weight of everything unspoken.

I pull my hand free, taking a step back before I can let myself be consumed by it.

"Before this goes any further—"

"I wasn't exactly planning to fuck you on the floor right now, Freya."

My face floods with heat as I chew on my lip.

"I—I know that."

"*Do* you?" he growls. "Because you've been looking at me ever since the last time you were over here like I might do exactly that. Like I'm a fucking animal who'll drag you into the nearest bushes and have my fucking way with you."

I arch a brow.

"Would you?"

"Maybe."

I grin.

So does he.

“I just…” I look away. “I know what I said, but I need *more*, Mal. Beyond the physical. I mean, don’t get me wrong, the physical is…I mean…”

“Yes?”

“Fucking *insane*,” I blurt before I can stop myself.

Mal smirks smugly.

“But I need more from you,” I say quietly.

It’s the truth. I can’t keep pretending that what’s happening between us is just physical. There’s more to it, and I need to understand it. I need to understand *him*.

Mal’s jaw tightens, his eyes flickering with—frustration, maybe? Hesitation? Then, to my surprise, he nods.

“Fine,” he says quietly. “What does *more* entail?”

“I…” I shrug, shaking my head.

Mal eyes me. “I mean, do you have a *list* or something?”

I roll my eyes. “Asshole,” I grin. “No, I just… I don’t know. I want to know more about you.”

He eyes me again, running his fingers over his jaw before shoving them through his hair.

“Fine.”

I grin. “Yeah?”

“Yes. You get one question.”

“What happens after one question?”

His gaze darkens, his voice turning low and gravelly. “I take you into the bathroom, clean your wounds, and bathe you.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s the trade.”

The words send a shiver down my spine, the heat between us flaring back to life. My mind races, but I can’t seem to think of anything else beyond the intensity of his offer. There’s something raw, something deeply intimate about the way he says it. And for the first time, I realize that even with all the walls between us, even with my own armor?

…I’m *defenseless* with this man. Always.

“Fine. What’s your earliest memory?” I ask softly.

He scowls, clearly not expecting that. “I was thinking favorite color,” he grumbles back.

I shrug. “Well?”

He grunts, his lips twitching. “Is that what you want to know? My favorite color?”

“Nice try, but no. I want to know what your earliest memory is.”

Mal’s gaze narrows, his expression hardening. Then there’s a flicker of something else—something deeper. He’s quiet for a moment, his brow furrowed, searching for the right answer.

“I was five,” he finally says, his voice low, almost hesitant. “My mother took me to the beach. We spent all day there, just the two of us. I remember the sand, the waves... I think it was the only time I ever saw her truly happy.”

The rawness in his voice takes me by surprise, and my heart aches at the unexpected vulnerability. I want to ask more, but I know better than to push him. Instead, I stay silent, letting the weight of his words settle over us.

“That’s it, that’s your question,” he says, his tone final.

Before I can respond, he grabs my hand, pulling me toward the bathroom. The heat between us thickens again, and I follow, my pulse quickening with every step.

Mal leads me upstairs, through his spacious, glass-walled bedroom and into the master bath. It's lit softly with low, warm lights casting long shadows over everything. Mal moves with quiet precision, turning on the water, testing the temperature, and grabbing a clean towel.

I stand frozen, watching as he prepares the bath with a level of care that feels out of place for someone like him. Like an elephant crafting fine china, or a wrecking ball painting a canvas.

Without a word, he turns to me, his hands reaching for the zipper of my jacket.

There's nothing forceful in his movements this time—nothing aggressive. He's slow, gentle, his fingers carefully peeling the riding suit away from my bruised skin. Mal's touch isn't about control now.

It's about care.

His eyes move over my body as he peels the rest of my clothes away—my shirt, my yoga pants, my bra and panties, until I'm standing naked in front of him. His look right now isn't one of lust. It's something far deeper that makes my heart race for a different reason.

"Sit," he commands gently, guiding me to the edge of the tub.

I sit, my heart pounding in my chest as Mal tends to my wounds, his fingers brushing over the cuts and bruises with a tenderness I would never have thought him capable of. He re-dresses some of them with waterproof bandages and wraps the worst of the burns on my hands and shoulder with tape to keep them dry.

Every touch sends a shiver through me, and by the time he lifts me into the bath, I'm completely undone.

My face heats as I turn and watch him undress with unhurried movements, stripping naked before he climbs in after me. He sits behind me, pulling me against him.

The warm water swirls around me as Mal holds me close, his strong arms wrapped securely around my body. For a moment, I close my eyes, letting

the warmth seep into my bones, letting the exhaustion from the day drop away. His chest presses against my back, steady and firm, a quiet strength.

It's strange, being like this with him. I'm used to Mal being aggressive, dangerous; the one taking control of every situation. Right now, he's almost gentle. His hands move carefully, his touch soft as he runs his fingers through my hair, wetting it with the warm water.

"Tip your head back," he murmurs, his voice low.

I do as he says, reclining against him as he begins to massage shampoo into my scalp. His touch is careful, soothing, and for the first time in forever, I allow myself to relax completely. The tension I've been holding in my shoulders, in my chest—it all melts away under his fingers, and I feel like finally I can breathe.

Mal's hands work through my hair, massaging the shampoo into a lather, his fingers moving with slow, deliberate care. The sensation is both comforting and oddly intimate, but not in the way I expected. It's not about desire—it's about trust. And I realize, as he rinses the shampoo away with warm water, that I do trust him.

Implicitly.

He may be dangerous, with more darkness in him than I can comprehend. But in this moment, he's not a monster.

When he's done with the shampoo, he does the same routine with the conditioner. After that, Mal reaches for the washcloth hanging by the side of the tub. He dips it into the warm water, then squeezes out the excess before gently running it over my skin, starting with my shoulders. The cloth is so soft against my bruised body, and his touch is so light and careful, it almost makes me want to cry.

He moves slowly, methodically, washing every inch of me with quiet attention. My arms, my back, skipping over any bruises, cuts or burns. I shiver when his hands slide to my front, washing my breasts, the cloth teasing over my nipples before he moves down to my stomach, then to my legs.

Then between them.

I bite back a soft gasp as the cloth gently rubs my thighs and grazes over my pussy, his fingers brushing against my skin as he works.

I watch him in silence. He's not just washing away the dirt and the grime of the day, he's washing away something much deeper: the walls I've built around myself, the fear, the uncertainty. It all seems to slip away under his hands.

Then, without speaking, Mal reaches for the razor on the side of the tub.

"Mal?" I whisper. I freeze for a moment, not sure what to expect.

He just shakes his head as he slips around me, until he's sitting facing me in the tub.

"Sit back," he commands, his voice its usual deep, rough growl, but edged with a softness now. I lean back against the edge of the deep tub, flushing as Mal lifts one of my legs out of the water. He lathers up rich cream on my legs.

Then he starts to shave me with the same tenderness. There's nothing rushed in his actions. His focus is absolute, his touch completely steady as he glides the razor over my legs, wiping the blade clean after each stroke.

He does one leg, rinsing it off and setting it back into the water before he does the same with the other: more lathered cream, more soft, slow, focused strokes until my skin is glistening and smooth.

When he finishes with my legs, he looks up at me, his blue eyes sparking with a little fire.

I know what comes next.

"Sit," he murmurs gruffly, nodding at the edge of the tub. Then his hands are there anyway, lifting me out of the sudsy water and setting me on the porcelain edge. He pushes my legs apart. More lathered cream.

Fuck…

My eyes flutter and roll back. My mouth opens slightly as Mal uses his fingers to rub the shaving cream over my most intimate area, massaging it into every fold.

“Hold still,” he says quietly.

He works meticulously, like an artist painting a masterpiece. I sit there spellbound, frozen, growing *wet* as his fingertips and the razor-sharp blade glide over my soft, sensitive skin, washing away the stubble, rinsing each individual inch of me as he goes.

It’s this bizarre, heady mix of sensual and selflessness—like foreplay meeting a trust exercise. By the time he’s dribbling water over my freshly shaved, pink pussy, I’m on the edge of insanity, my knees shaking as his fingers stroke over my skin.

“*Mal…*”

His tongue takes his fingers’ place. I moan softly in the low light of the bathroom, arching my back and gasping as he tongues my clit gently. My fingers slip into his hair, gripping his head tightly as I start to shake and writhe against his face. His tongue plunges into me, his fingers teasing and stroking my freshly shaved skin before curling into me and stroking my g-spot.

The feel of his strong, wet tongue stroking every inch of my extra-sensitive skin pushes me over the edge quickly. With a cry, my hips bucking, I explode on his tongue, his name tumbling from my lips over and over as he tongues me through the release and into oblivion.

I’m barely aware of him lifting me from the tub and wrapping me in a towel. I don’t say anything. There are no words or way to express the depth of what I’m feeling right now.

Instead, I let him pull me into his arms in his bed, my head resting against his chest as he holds me close.

For now, this is enough.

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FREYA

"*Mal*!"

I scream his name into the cool wooden floor of the living room. My back arches, my nails digging into the floorboards as pleasure explodes through my core. Mal's thick fingers dig into my skin, marring me with delicious bruises as he grips my hips and rams into me. His thick cock sinks into my eager pussy, the wet sounds of us filling the space as he fucks me against the floor.

Yes, I should be resting and healing.

Oops.

I whimper as he leans over me, his massive body pinning me down, forcing my knees wide apart on the floor. I cry out when his teeth rake over my neck, biting and sucking, piercing my skin as he drives into me, spanking my ass.

His hand wraps around my throat from behind, my eyes rolling back in ecstasy as I feel his lips brush my ear.

"*Are you going to be my good little whore and come all over my big fucking cock*?"

"*Yes*!" I choke, another cry wrenching from my lips as he reaches down to pinch and twist one of my nipples. "*Fuck yes*, Mal! I—"

I jolt when I hear pounding on the front door to the guesthouse.

“*Are you fucking kidding me*?” Mal growls darkly. He doesn’t slow or stop, and I can feel my eyes rolling back as his hips roll, reaming my swollen pussy with his *god-like* dick as I start to shatter all over again.

The pounding comes again. Harder this time.

“Fuck *off*!” Mal roars, groaning as his hands grip my hips harder, fucking into me with hard, punishing strokes.

The person pounding on the front door doesn’t hear—or does, but doesn’t give a shit. Because the knocking comes *again*.

“FUCK OFF!” Mal yells.

More knocking.

“*Goddammit*,” he hisses. I groan when he slows and gently eases his cock out of me, leaving me feeling empty and needy.

He wraps my hair in a fist, pulling me upright and twisting my head around to kiss me fiercely.

“Guarantee this is Tak being an asshole,” he grunts. “I’ll get rid of him, then I’m going to make you come all over my cock and then my face like a good girl.”

Sweet. Jesus.

“*Okay*,” I manage to blurt, shivering as I grab his face and kiss him heatedly.

Mal pulls away and gets to his feet, grabbing his t-shirt from the floor where he tossed it earlier and holding it in front of him as a semblance of modesty.

It’s…not really working. It doesn’t do *shit* to hide his large, raging erection, and barely covers the grooves of his hips.

But whatever. It’s his cousin. Who cares.

Mal marches across the open living room area, muttering darkly under his breath.

“Swear to fucking God, Tak,” he barks as I giggle and slide back to hide behind the couch, peeking around the corner to watch the fireworks.

Mal reaches the door, looking furious: his broad shoulders tense, his fists clenched at his side as holds the measly t-shirt over his cock. I almost feel sorry for Takeshi on the other side of the door.

Almost.

Mal violently yanks the door open. “What part of *fuck off* did you not—”

My entire body freezes.

It’s not Takeshi.

It’s Damian.

My heart plummets, and before I can react, I see surprise flash across Damian’s face, his gaze locking onto Mal’s naked form in dangerous amusement.

Except then his gaze moves past Mal…and to where I’m peeking from around the corner of the couch.

Instantly, the amusement on his face disappears. His purplish eyes go cold, his chiseled jaw grinds.

The atmosphere in the room shifts dramatically, the tension skyrocketing as Damian drags his fierce gaze back to Mal. Both men stare at each other, neither of them saying a word.

Mal’s scowl deepens as he sizes up the man in front of him, while Damian’s expression quickly transforms from shock into something cold and protective.

“What the *fuck* is this?” Damian finally says, his voice tight with barely controlled fury as he steps forward, his eyes cutting past Mal to where I’m scrambling back behind the couch. It feels like I’m hyperventilating as I hastily pull my clothes behind the couch with me, pulling on panties, my skirt, and my top before I get up from the floor.

My heart is racing, heat rising to my cheeks as I shakily get to my feet and turn to the door, not quite able to meet Damian's eyes.

This, obviously, is *not* how he was supposed to find out about Mal and me.

He also wasn't supposed to be here until tomorrow.

"*Hey*…" I manage, my voice small as I emerge from behind the couch, fully dressed now but still feeling entirely exposed. "So…*yeah*."

"*Yeah*?" Damian growls darkly.

I clear my throat, feeling the heat on my face and the lingering delicious soreness between my legs from Mal.

"This isn't what it looks like."

I almost cringe saying it. Mal turns to eye me with smug amusement, still not bothering to cover his nakedness aside from the t-shirt covering his dick.

Damian's gaze flicks to me, his eyes narrowing. "Really, Frey? Because it *sort of* looks to me like you're fucking him."

Mal's jaw clenches, and I can see the flicker under the surface, the dark, dangerous edge that always seems to be simmering just beneath his calm.

Possessiveness.

I shiver as he slowly turns to level his cold gaze at Damian. "*Watch your fucking tone*," he growls, his voice low, full of warning.

Damian takes a step forward, his body tensing, ready for a fight. He and Mal are roughly the same size. And while Mal wears his savageness and his fury on his sleeve, Damian's is hidden in a way that's insidiously disarming.

He stops when he's nose to nose with Mal, his purplish eyes narrowing darkly.

"If you think I'm going to stand here and let you treat her like some—"

"Finish that fucking sentence," Mal hisses, "and I'll break your fucking jaw."

“That’s enough!” I snap, surging across the room and getting between them before things get any worse. The air between them is electric, charged with all the tension that’s been building since the moment Damian walked through that door. “Both of you!” I bark loudly. “Stop!”

Neither of them backs down. They just glare at each other. Mal’s possessiveness is written all over him—in his body language, in the way he stands just behind me, ready to tear Damian apart if he makes the wrong move. And Damian, always so protective of me, is staring Mal down with barely contained fury.

“I’m not letting this happen, Frey,” Damian hisses, his voice tight with frustration. “Not with *him*.”

The dangerous calm in Mal’s eyes sending a shiver through me. “I don’t recall that you have any fucking say in what she does,” he growls.

“Like hell I—”

“STOP IT!” I scream, turning to shove Damian back. “Mal’s right, you don’t,” I snap. “If I start shooting up heroin or going on killing sprees, then yes, you have permission to intervene in my life.” I throw a quick look at Mal, then turn back to Damian. “But not for this.”

Damian’s eyes turn a supernatural shade of purplish fire. “Frey, are you fucking *kidding me* with this fucking psycho—”

“*Enough*!” I yell again, this time whirling to plant my hands on Mal’s bare chest, pushing him back before he attacks Damian, trying to stop the situation from spiraling completely out of control.

I mean, it’s already almost there.

My eyes lock with Mal’s, asking him to *stop*. His jaw grinds, his eyes drawing to ice-cold blue slits. But he nods his chin curtly, and I feel the tension in his body abate under my touch.

I swallow, turning back to my brother.

“Damian,” I say quietly. “I’m sorry you found out like this. But this *isn’t* your call.”

His eyes flick to mine, and I can see the hurt and frustration behind them. He's always been protective of me—sometimes too much—but I know this is more than that. He's angry, confused, and probably worried that I'm making a huge mistake.

A week ago, I might have agreed with him.

Not anymore.

"I'm a grown woman," I say, my voice calm but firm. "I can make my own decisions."

Damian's jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think he's going to argue. But then he exhales sharply, shaking his head. "Fine. Do what you want, Freya."

He turns and strides away, leaving the tension between us hanging heavy in the air. I feel a pang of guilt twist in my chest, but before I can dwell on it, Mal pulls me close, his arm around my waist.

"You don't owe him an explanation," Mal mutters low in my ear.

I lean into him, my body instinctively responding to the heat between us, but my mind is spinning.

This is a mess. And it's only going to get worse.

THE DINING ROOM at Kenzo's mansion is alive with conversation, but you can already feel the tension, even though neither Damian or Mal is even in the room yet. It's so thick it's like an invisible storm cloud hanging over the table, and I can feel the weight of it pressing down on me as I take my seat.

…A seat I've *very* diplomatically selected, with Annika's help.

In the last few hours, I've come clean with my best friend. Again, not that I *owe* anyone anything. But I felt like I should put cards on the table. So we sat by one of the koi ponds, and I told her everything.

Well…you know…*almost*.

And of course, immediately Annika reminded me why she's my best friend in the world and closer than a sister when she hugged me and told me all she wanted for me was to be happy and safe.

I told her I was both of those things.

But yeah, Dinner Table Cold War tonight was, and still is, a real possibility.

So to try to deal with the overprotectiveness of Damian *and* the outrageous possessiveness of Mal, Anni helped me arrange the circular dining table so that I could appease both. We put Mal to my left, Damian to my right with Annika next to him, then Kenzo, Sota, Kir and Isaak—who all arrived early with Damian—then Hana, and finally Tak, in between her and Mal.

We even used place cards, for fuck's sake.

Except of course, when I walked into the dining room just now, I saw our carefully planned diplomacy had been utterly *fucked*.

Now, the table goes Mal, me, *Hana*, Annika, Kenzo, Sota, Kir, *Damian*, Isaak, and then Takeshi, putting Damian directly opposite me.

It doesn't take a detective to figure out who the culprit is, especially when said culprit walks in looking extremely pleased with himself as he takes his seat next to me.

"*Seriously*?" I mutter, turning to Mal.

"Seriously," he growls back, just as Damian walks in with a scowl, seeing where he's sitting.

For a second, I think we're going to have another almost-brawl on our hands. But Kir senses the tension, and beckons for Damian to come sit.

Immediately afterward, he glances back at me, arching a stern but quizzical brow as his eyes swivel from me, to Mal, and then back to me.

My face burns as I tug out my phone and send him a brief text.

ME

It's complicated. I'm sorry. I should have told you earlier. Can we talk after dinner?

Kir’s reply is quick, and brings a smile to my face when I read it.

KIR

You don’t own me or anyone else an apology for your feelings, Freya. And trust me, it’s never NOT complicated. I’ll be here for a few days if you want to talk. But you don’t owe me anything.

KIR

Just tell me—are you happy, safe, and respected?

I bite my bottom lip, my face heating.

ME

Yes. Very much so.

KIR

Then all I am is happy for you.

KIR

With of course the obligatory “if he hurts you, I’ll cut off his balls and make him eat them on toast before I spend roughly two weeks killing him in the slowest, most excruciating way I can dream up”.

I grin as I look up across the table at Kir. He winks at me, nodding his chin.

Jiro, Kenzo’s personal chef, brings out the lavish spread of food he’s prepared for the night: a mix of gorgeous sushi and sashimi along with all sorts of insanely delicious Japanese snacks: *karaage*, *menchi katsu*, assorted *yakitori*, and *okonomiyaki*.

And of course, sake.

So much sake.

Sota and Kir talk a little business before Kenzo steers the conversation around to Kyoto in general.

Kir clears his throat, glancing my way. “Freya, before I forget, I was hoping you could access my home system remotely at some point and poke around for any security holes.” His brow furrows. “I’m not certain, but I think someone’s trying to hack into it.”

Damian snickers. “Been clicking those sketchy pop-up ads, uncle? Looking for hot horny MILFs in your area again?”

Kir shoots him a withering look as Annika and I hide giggles and grins.

“*No*, wise-ass,” he grunts. “But there’s a lot of sensitive business stuff on my home network, so I want to make doubly sure it’s secure.”

I shrug. “I mean, not to brag, but *I* built it. They’d have to be *really* good to get in. But yeah,” I smile at him. “I’ll take a look—”

I shiver when I feel Mal’s hand slip under the tablecloth to rest on my thigh —silently reminding me of the power dynamic between us that never seems to shift.

Damian, across the table, watches us coolly, his expression unreadable, but I sense anger simmering beneath the surface.

Mal’s grip tightens on my leg, his thumb brushing over the fabric of my jeans in a slow, deliberate motion. His touch sends a distracting ripple of heat through me, making it hard to focus on the conversation around us. I’m sure that’s exactly what he wants—to remind me, maybe everyone else in the room, that I’m his.

Marking his territory. Claiming me.

And the crazy thing is, part of me likes it.

A *big* part.

I know I shouldn’t. I know his possessiveness should feel suffocating. But there’s something about the way Mal exerts his dominance over the situation, the way he’s so unapologetic about it, that makes my heart race in a way I can’t control.

“So, Damian, tell me,” Mal says coldly. “Have you hired any more sexual predators to fill the vacancy in your ranks back in New York?”

I groan. He means Dimitri. No, scratch that. He means *to stir shit up* and make this whole dinner go nuclear.

Damian’s mouth twists as he smiles right back at Mal. “You’ll find, Mal, that I don’t take bait that easily. If you’re curious, I slit the neck of the piece of shit you’re referring to personally and made sure he was still breathing when I stuffed his balls down his throat.”

“*Dinner conversation, Damian,*” Kir mutters under his breath, his tone exasperated as he shoots his nephew a dark look.

Damian dips his chin. “Apologies, uncle,” he says politely before locking eyes with Mal again. “However, judging from the bruises on my sister’s fucking neck,” he grits, “I think the sexual predator I’m more concerned about is sitting across the table from—”

“She’s not your sister,” Mal says icily.

“And she’s *certainly* not your fucking punching bag—”

“No, she’s not, but you’re about to be.”

Mal’s hand leaves my thigh as he calmly gets to his feet. Damian does the same, with Takeshi and Isaak following right after.

“*I think*…”

Sota’s voice isn’t loud. But when he speaks, the room goes quiet.

“That we have concluded this conversation,” he murmurs, shooting Mal a look. “Please, *sit*, Mal.”

Mal’s stormy, ice-blue eyes dart across the table, boring holes in Damian. But then, with a nod to Sota, he takes his seat. Takeshi follows, then Damian and Isaak. I shoot them both a “what the fuck” look. Issak looks his usual impassive, silent self. but maybe a *little* sheepish. Damian just glares back at me before turning to slice Mal in two with his gaze.

Mal’s hand slips back to my thigh and squeezes.

Hard.

The rest of dinner is a blur of tension and awkward conversation, but I’m only half paying attention. All I can focus on is Mal’s hand on my thigh, the

feeling of his fingers pressed against my skin, grounding me and pulling me further into the dark, dangerous world we've built for ourselves.

After dinner, there's more drinks, and of course dessert, and a bit more chatter. But eventually Sota announces he's going home. Kir and Isaak depart soon after to their hotel in central Kyoto.

I love him to bits, but mercifully, they take Damian with them.

When they're gone, Mal stands from the table, conspicuously holding my hand for the rest of them—if they still weren't aware of what was going on between us—to see. Then, wordlessly, with my face throbbing as I shoot Annika a grin, Mal leads me from the room out of the house, and back to the guesthouse.

He ushers me in and then steps back outside for a moment. When he returns, the tension between us shifts, morphing into something heavier and more dangerous. Mal pulls me close, his hands gripping my waist as he presses me against the wall, his body crowding mine, and I can see the possessiveness burning in his eyes.

"Just so we're fucking clear," he growls, his words vibrating through me. "You're *mine*. I'm not fucking sharing you with anyone."

I swallow hard. "Okay, just so long as *you're* clear that Damian's like a brother to me. It's not—"

"Are you related by blood?"

I frown. "What?"

"Is he a blood relation. Do you share DNA. Were his parents your parents."

I roll my eyes. "No—"

"Then he's *not* your brother," Mal grunts, his voice rougher now. "He's not your brother, and he sure as hell isn't mine. He's just another man trying to take what *belongs* to me."

There's something dark and raw in the way he says it that sends a shiver down my spine. But it's not fear—it's a twisted kind of excitement, a pull I can't explain, like I'm addicted to the madness that is Mal Ulstäd.

He presses his body closer, pinning me to the wall as his hands trail up my sides, his touch possessive and firm. “I won’t share you, Freya,” he growls again, his voice a low rasp in my ear. “I don’t care if he sees you as a sister or what your relationship is with him. To me, he’s just competition. And I. Don’t. Lose.”

I should be pulling away, telling him to stop being so controlling, but the truth is, I don’t want to and I’m not sure I could if I tried. The intensity of his gaze, the sheer force of his will, pulls me in deeper every single time.

“Mal...” I whisper, my voice trembling with a tangle of emotions I can barely sort through. “It’s *not* like that with Damian. He’s always been protective of me, but that’s it. He’s the one that got Annika and I out of running scams and trying to steal watches, introduced us to Kir… He gave us the life we have now.”

His grip tightens slightly, and his eyes flash with something dangerous, possessive and fierce. “Just the same,” he growls, his voice rougher. “You’re *mine*. Not his. Nobody else’s. Just mine.”

There’s an intensity in his words that should terrify me, but instead, stirs something deep inside me—something dark that I’ve been trying to deny. As much as I want to push back and tell him to ease up, part of me craves this—the way he claims me so ferociously and makes me feel like I’m the only thing in the world that matters.

“You like this, don’t you?” he murmurs, as if reading my thoughts. “You *like* that I won’t share you with anyone.”

I swallow hard.

He’s right. And I hate that he’s right.

But I don’t say anything. I can’t. Instead, I just stare up at him, my heart pounding, my body betraying me as the truth settles deep in my chest. I do like it. And I want everything he’s offering, even if it’s dangerous and twisted.

Mal’s lips curl into a dark, satisfied smile, his hand sliding around to the back of my neck, pulling me closer. “*You’re mine*,” he whispers in a low,

possessive growl that sends a shiver down my spine. “And I’m never letting you go.”

His mouth crashes to mine, and the rest of the world falls away.

LATER, as we lie together in the dark, the silence between us feels heavy with all the things we still haven’t said. I can feel the weight of Mal’s arm draped over my waist, the slow rise and fall of his chest against my back. There’s a stillness in the air, but I know it won’t last.

I turn slightly, glancing up at him in the dim light. His eyes are closed, but I can tell he’s not asleep. There’s too much tension in his body. He’s still brooding, caught up in his own thoughts.

“Mal?” I whisper.

His eyes open slowly.

“Why are you like this?” I ask softly, my fingers tracing the lines of his arm as it rests around me. “Why don’t you let anyone in?”

His expression tightens slightly, as if my question has touched something raw inside him.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, he speaks. “I just don’t know how,” he mutters, his voice rough around the edges. “I don’t know how to be anything other than this.”

His words hit me harder than I expect, sending a wave of sadness crashing over me. Mal is so consumed by his need to control and claim that he’s built walls around himself that even he doesn’t know how to break down. The worst part is, I can feel those walls closing in around me, too.

“I don’t need you to be anything else,” I whisper, my voice trembling as I turn in his arms to face him. “I just need you to be honest with me. Please… Let me in.”

He’s silent for a long moment, his gaze searching mine as if trying to decide if he can trust me with the truth. Then, slowly, he exhales, the tension in his body easing just a fraction.

“I’m trying,” he murmurs quietly in the darkness. “I just don’t know if I can.”

It’s the closest thing to vulnerability I’ve ever heard from him, and it sends a flood of emotion through me. I lean into him, pressing a soft kiss to his chest, and for a moment, we just lie there together, the weight of his admission hanging between us.

Maybe he’ll never fully let me in. Maybe Mal is too broken, too consumed by his own darkness to ever really change. But in this moment, it feels like enough.

For now, at least, I will take what he’s giving me.

And maybe, just maybe, that’s all I need.

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MAL

MY HAND GRIPS Freya's tighter than it should as I walk her back to the guesthouse after that shit-show of a dinner with Kir, Issak, and that fuck Damian. But I don't let go. I can't.

There's a primal, possessive urge clawing at me that I've never had for anyone else—not like this. It tightens its grip on my chest every time I see her talking to someone else, laughing with someone else, *touching* someone else.

Like Damian.

Just her brother.

Fuck that. They're not related by blood. All I see is another man trying to be close to what's mine. And the thought of him near her makes my blood boil.

Freya glances up at me, her face serene in the moonlight, and for a second, that possessiveness softens. Just for a second.

I've never needed to own something—*someone*—like this before. Never felt the need to claim anyone in the way I want to claim her. She looks up at me with those curious eyes, so full of trust, and it only makes me want to pull her closer. Keep her there, pressed against me, away from everyone else.

Damian. Kir. Hell, the entire world.

We’re almost at the door of the guesthouse when something small and dark catches my eye, carved into the side of a tree near the path. My steps falter, and my grip on Freya’s hand tightens.

I stop.

“What is it?” Freya asks, turning to face me, her brow furrowed in concern, her free hand lightly brushing my arm.

I shake my head. “Nothing,” I mutter, tugging her toward the door. I don’t want to scare her—don’t want to admit that what I think I just saw might be real.

But I need to be sure. I need to *know*.

I open the door to the guesthouse and usher her in before I can second-guess myself. “Back in a second.”

Her eyes flicker with confusion, but she doesn’t ask questions, just nods as I turn and head back down the path, my heart pounding louder with every step.

There. That tree.

I kneel down, squinting at the rough bark—

What the fuck.

It’s gone now. Not worn off. Not covered. Literally just not there, as if it never was.

My brows furrow.

I fucking *know* what I saw. The old Norse rune is unmistakable to me, and just the sight of it sent a chill down my spine when I swear I saw it a second ago.

Fascist Nazi cowards like Kasper love to steal symbols, phrases, and myths they have no connection to and no right to use. I mean the swastika was a Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain symbol for peace for over a millennium until Hitler and his fucking goons stole and forever warped it. The Celtic cross has been twisted by the same Nazi fucks for years, too.

But their favorite to steal from has always been the Norse.

The *sonnenrad*, or black sun rune. Depictions of *Mjölnir*, the hammer of the god of thunder, or the *valknut*. Even the fucking SS “double lightning bolt” hate symbol was stolen—derived from the *sowilo*, or sun rune. All of this shit was to reinforce their fucked, twisted views on “Aryan ancestry”.

Nazis bring *nothing* to the table but hate and fear. Every single part of their imagery and ideology was stolen and poisoned to suit their obscene fantasies.

And the one I swear to fuck was just on this tree is one I know above them all.

Odal.

It’s one of the darkest; a symbol of heritage, bloodlines, and supremacy that Kasper had tattooed on his own chest. One he used to draw in the dirt, and on fences when he went for walks.

One he used to *carve onto trees*.

“A warning” he called it. “To the un-pure and the filth.”

A cold shiver rips up my spine.

I fucking *know* what I saw a minute ago when Freya and I walked by. But now, it’s gone.

Just like that.

I curse under my breath, standing up quickly and wiping my hand on my jeans as if to erase the memory of it.

Am I losing my fucking mind?

I glance around, but the night is still.

Fuck.

I turn back toward the guesthouse, my jaw clenched. Maybe it was a trick of the light. Or sleep deprivation, after becoming so nocturnal with Freya.

I’ve seen things before, after long stretches without sleep. Nightmares. Hallucinations. But this...

This felt different.

It feels like the past. Like Kasper’s shadow reaching through time to ensnare me again.

I shake the thought off and make my way back inside the guesthouse. Freya is standing right where I left her, giving me that slightly defiant, perennially inquisitive look that always grabs a hold of me.

My mind is still racing. But I’ll deal with what I think I saw later.

For now?

I’m focused on her.

I pull her close, my hands gripping her waist tightly as I press her against the wall. My body cages hers, possessiveness burning in my eyes.

She’s mine. And no one—not Damian, not Kasper’s fucking ghost, not anyone—is going to take her away from me.

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FREYA

COOL NIGHT AIR filters in through the large floor-to-ceiling windows, the moon casting a soft silver glow across the room. I lean back against Mal's chest, resting my head on his shoulder as we sit on the couch in the guesthouse.

Outside, the trees sway in the strong wind, their branches whispering against the glass. Mal's just explained to me that monsoon season in Japan is approaching, bringing with it typhoons and other huge winds.

We got a taste of it earlier, with black clouds and whipping, raw gusts chasing over the hills above Kyoto, but it's quiet now.

The peaceful silence is a welcome contrast to the chaos that's been swirling for days now. His arm is draped over my shoulders, his fingers absentmindedly tracing the skin near my collarbone and down my breast, sending little electric shocks through me. I tilt my head back, looking up at him. His face is cast in shadows, his strong jawline lit only by the moonlight.

There's something about these quiet moments with Mal that makes me feel like the world could end, and I wouldn't care—as long as I was here, in his arms.

"You never told me about it," he says suddenly, his voice cutting through the stillness.

I blink up at him, confused. "About what?"

His hand brushes over my ribs, fingers hovering over the tattoo etched into my skin just below my left breast.

Memento Mori

“Memento Mori,” he murmurs. “Why that?”

My breath hitches.

“Just a thing I got when I was younger.”

He doesn’t reply. When I glance back up at him, he’s looking at me with an intensity that honestly freaks me out a little.

“What?” I mumble.

Mal shakes his head. “You *can* be impulsive. But this wasn’t. You planned this. You picked exactly where you wanted it, the font…”

I shiver. Goddammit, he’s too good at digging into people’s heads to get at the truth.

But he’s not going to get it from me. Not all of it, at least.

He doesn’t need to know about the time-bomb inside of me.

“It means—”

“Remember you must die, I know,” Mal says patiently. “Which is why I want to know *why* you’ve got this of all phrases tattooed near your heart.”

I swallow hard, suddenly feeling the full meaning of the words on my skin. “It’s just…a reminder,” I say softly, trying to brush it off. “To live with purpose. To remember that life is short.”

Of course, the truth is much heavier than that. It sits deep in my chest like a lead weight, the knowledge that I’ll never grow old, never experience life in all the ways I want to. I’d accepted it—at least, I told myself I had—but now, having Mal, feeling this connection with him… I want more time.

And I’m heartbroken I won’t get it.

He doesn’t push or ask for more, but I can feel the weight of his gaze on me, waiting for me to share something deeper.

I want to, but I can’t.

Not yet.

So I change the subject. My eyes drift over the dark ink that covers Mal’s body, tracing the intricate patterns and shapes. There’s one tattoo in particular that’s always caught my eye—the large piece that curls across his upper arm and shoulder, a copy of the iconic Japanese wood block print by Hokusai called “The Great Wave off Kanagawa.” I’ve seen it on posters or wallpaper a hundred different times—the swirling ocean wave crashing down, frozen in time. But on Mal’s skin, it looks almost alive.

“What about this?” I ask, my fingers brushing over the tattoo. “Why The Great Wave?”

Mal looks down at me, a slight smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. “You know what it is?”

“Of course,” I say, rolling my eyes. “I just don’t get it. Why this? Love for Japan?”

He’s quiet for a moment, his eyes flickering away, as if he’s debating whether to answer. Mal’s not one to share easily—he holds everything close to his chest, every word a secret he can’t afford to let slip. Tonight, though, something feels different.

“I surf,” he says finally, almost hesitantly.

I blink. “I’m sorry, *you*? Surfing?”

He chuckles softly. “Is that so hard to imagine?”

“I mean, the lack of puka shell necklaces and overuse of the words ‘gnarly’ and ‘bruh’ sort of make it difficult.”

I glance up at him again, trying to picture him on a surfboard, cutting through waves. It’s hard to imagine—no, actually, it’s not. There’s something wild about Mal, something untamable, like the ocean itself.

Surfing has always seemed like freedom to me—wild and exhilarating, like flying across the water. “Must be nice,” I say quietly, trying to keep my voice light. “I’ve never surfed.”

Mal’s eyebrows raise in surprise. “Why not?”

I shrug. “The sun?”

“That’s the only thing stopping you?”

I snort. “The threat of crippling agony and burning is a definite turnoff.”

“I could teach you,” he says, his voice low and steady.

I look up at him, startled. “What?”

“At night,” he says, a hint of a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. “I could teach you. No sunlight, no crowds. Just us.”

For a moment, I can’t breathe. The idea of surfing, of feeling that kind of freedom, *with Mal*… It sends a thrill through me, a spark of something wild and reckless.

But fear is there too, dampening my excitement.

“I don’t know,” I murmur. “I can’t—”

“You can,” he interrupts, his voice firm.

There’s a blazing certainty in his voice that makes me want to throw caution to the wind and just…live. For once, I want to forget about the Huntington’s, about the ticking bomb that’s inside me. I want to be free. I want to be reckless.

But the fear is still there, whispering in the back of my mind.

My gaze drags back to his Kanagawa tattoo. Then it slides down to the scar that cuts through the bottom of the piece. It’s jagged and rough, like something that wasn’t meant to be there, and it stands out against the smooth lines of the ink. But it also looks much older than the tattoo around it. In fact, the artist who did this tattoo has clearly gone out of their way to work around it, since tattooing scar tissue is so tricky. So it’s older than the tattoo.

I’ve noticed it before, but I’ve never asked about it. Now, though, with the darkness blanketing us and the quiet intimacy of the moment, I feel emboldened to ask.

“How did you get that?” I ask softly, tracing the scar with my fingers.

Mal tenses beneath my touch. For a moment, I think he’s going to brush off the question like he always does when anything feels too personal. But then he sighs, his eyes flicking away.

“It happened when I was young,” he says, his voice hollow and distant. “That’s all.”

I frown, guessing there’s more to the story, but I don’t push. We all have our scars, visible and invisible, and some are too painful to share.

Silence settles over us again, but it’s comfortable, like we’ve said all that needs to be said for now. I lean back against his chest again, closing my eyes as I let the rhythm of his breathing lull me into a sense of calm.

The storm outside may have passed, but the storm inside me rages on, a constant battle between wanting more and knowing I can never have it.

I haven’t told Mal about the Huntington’s, that I’m living on borrowed time. I don’t know if I’ll *ever* be able to tell him.

But for now, I’ll take this moment, with his arms around me, and his heart beating against mine, and I’ll hold onto it as tightly as I can.

Later that night, as the moon rises higher in the sky and the world outside the windows fades into darkness, I find myself staring at the ink on my skin again.

Memento Mori.

I trace the letters with my fingers, feeling the weight of them in my chest. It’s a mantra that I’ve lived by for years. But there’s another half to that phrase, one that I’ve never given much thought to.

Memento Vivere.

Remember to live.

Maybe… Maybe that’s the part I need to focus on.

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FREYA

THE SUN IS JUST DIPPING below the horizon, casting long shadows across the grounds of the Mori house. I watch the gardens slip into twilight before I step outside. I take a seat on the back terrace, wrapped in a soft cardigan, nursing a cup of my “morning” coffee.

I glance at my phone, rolling my eyes when I see the simple thumbs-up emoji response from Annika to my question about doing something later tonight.

Yeah, that’s a no. That’s code for “sorry, actually, Kenzo and I will be locked in his suite banging each other’s brains out until we can’t move, at which point we’ll probably do it again.”

I grin, sighing.

I’m happy for her. Even though we’re all living in the same house, and I’ve barely seen her in a week.

There wasn’t a precise point where I “decided” to stay in Kyoto. I just… didn’t go back to New York. New York was never “home” for me. A lot of places have held that designation over the past eleven years since I left home. Some for longer than others—like when Annika and I were basically trapped with Valon, living in Milan.

New York was only a temporary stopping point. I mean, I spent the few months I was there living exclusively in hotel rooms.

But Kyoto?

I smile to myself as I sip my coffee. It feels weird to say a place I'm just visiting "feels like home". But it *does*. Annika is here, for a start. Kir has zero issues with me doing my work for him from here.

Mal's here.

The sound of footsteps pulls me from my thoughts.

Instantly, a heated tremor ripples up my spine.

I don't need to turn around to know it's him. His presence is unmistakable—dark and inevitable, like a storm rolling in over the mountains. He doesn't say anything for a minute, just stands behind me, his long shadow stretching across the terrace.

Finally, he speaks, his voice low and commanding. "Come with me."

I blink, glancing over my shoulder at him, frowning slightly.

"Come with you where?" I ask.

He doesn't answer, just steps forward, reaching out to take my hand, and before I know it, I'm being pulled to my feet. I take another large sip of my coffee and then set the mug down, stumbling after him.

Mal leads me through the house and out the front door to the sweeping driveway, where his Jeep is parked. The top is down, and in the back seat are two surfboards, their sleek forms jutting up into the evening sky.

I stop in my tracks, my eyes widening before I turn to glance at him. "What…?"

He grins that rare, crooked smile that always sends a jolt of electricity through me. "Get in."

I hesitate for a moment, my mind spinning with questions. But then I feel that familiar pull—the irresistible urge to go with him and see where this will lead. Without another word, I climb into the passenger seat.

We don't speak as he pulls out of the driveway and onto the winding mountain roads that lead away from the house. The wind rushes past us,

cool and fresh. I glance over at him: Mal is focused on the road, his hands steady on the wheel.

I watch the moon climb, the sky turning a deep shade of purple as the stars begin to peek through. After a while, I can't help but ask.

"So…surfboards?"

Mal's eyes flicker toward me for a brief second, a hint of amusement in them. "Thought it was time you learned."

I stare at him, gaping. "I was clear that I've never surfed before, right?"

"You'd also never fucked before."

My face explodes with heat. Mal just grins.

"Why now?" I ask softly, watching his profile as he drives, the moonlight casting shadows across his face.

Mal's hand slides off the gearshift, his fingers brushing mine briefly. "Because I want to."

There's something in his tone that makes me stop questioning. Maybe this is what I need.

And maybe Mal knows that better than I do.

HONJOHAMA BEACH, two hours from Kyoto, is empty, the waves crashing softly against the shore. Silvery moonlight glistens over the rolling waves and the sand, and I can't help but feel a sense of awe at the beauty of it all. The darkness makes everything feel a little more dangerous, a little more thrilling.

Clouds ripple across the moon as Mal grabs the surfboards, and I follow him toward the water, kicking off my shoes and letting my feet sink into the cool, wet sand. The sound of the ocean fills the air, a steady, rhythmic pulse that matches the thrum of my heart.

“You’ll want this.”

Mal hands me a black long-sleeved wetsuit with the bottom part cut to shorts, along with a simple black bikini. I bite my lip, heat teasing my cheeks as he strips down to nothing and pulls on a swimsuit and a men’s wetsuit in the same style as mine.

“If you need help ripping your clothes off, just ask.”

I blush, realizing I’ve been openly staring at him. I pull off my clothes, feeling the heat of his gaze on me as I slip on the bikini and wriggle into the wetsuit.

“We’ll see how long we have,” Mal growls, turning to glance up at the sky over the water. Dark clouds are rolling in, and the surf is definitely getting higher. “We might have a storm rolling in.”

I swallow uneasily, tension knotting in my stomach.

“I don’t know…” I murmur, looking out over the frankly *terrifying* black water.

“You can.”

I shiver as I glance at him. “Hmm?”

“You can do this. We’ll practice standing up on the board in the sand first. Then we’ll head out.”

He hands me one of the boards. “Ready?”

I nod. Honestly, I’m not sure if I am. But something about being here with Mal makes me want to push past that fear, to throw caution to the wind and just…live.

Memento Vivere.

We spend about an hour on the sand first, Mal showing me how to slide from a lying position to a standing one in one motion. The trick is, you’ve gotta do this while balancing on water, and a wave is carrying you toward the shore.

Even on the sand, I suck at first. But after about a million tries, I start to suck at it *less*. Another million tries after that, I think I've got the hang of it.

Mal walks with me toward the water, the cool waves lapping at our feet. The moon hangs low in the sky, its silvery glow making the water look almost ethereal, though definitely spooky, too.

I shiver. "Are their sharks out here?"

Mal grins. "Only one way to find out."

Well, fuck.

I swallow back my fear and follow him into the water. There's a quiet peace in the darkness, a stillness that settles over us as we wade deeper into the waves.

He shows me how to lie on the board, his hands steady and sure as they guide me. "You've got this," he says quietly.

I take a deep breath as I paddle out into the open water, my heart racing with both fear and excitement. The waves beneath us are gentle at first, rolling like soft, undulating hills. But as we paddle farther from shore, I can feel the power of the ocean underneath me, the pull of the tide growing stronger.

Mal is just ahead of me, his body moving with the waves as if he's part of them. There's a grace to him I've never seen before, a fluidity that's both beautiful and unexpected.

"You're doing great," he calls back over the sound of the waves.

My arms are already starting to tire from the effort, but I manage a smile. The cool salt spray on my skin and the vastness of the ocean stretching out before me feels like freedom, and for the first time in ages, I feel like I'm in control. Maybe not of my disease, or my fate. But this moment?

This moment is *mine*.

"Get ready to stand!" Mal yells as a wave comes surging toward us from behind.

I hesitate, my heart pounding in my chest. But it’s okay. I trust him.

“*Now*!”

I push to standing, my legs wobbly, but somehow, I stay upright. The wave carries me forward, the wind rushing past me, and for the briefest moment, I feel utterly weightless—like I’m flying.

“Mal!” I shriek, laughing as the wave takes me toward the shore. I catch his grin out of the corner of my eye, and it’s like nothing else matters.

I don’t know how long we surf. It feels like hours. Time itself blurs out here, the moonlight and the ocean blended together in perfect harmony. I’m breathless, my body exhausted, but I don’t want to stop. I don’t want this night ever to end.

Then something shifts.

The wind picks up, a sharp gust that sends a chill down my spine. I glance out at the horizon and see the dark clouds from earlier rolling in *way* faster. The ocean is starting to churn, the waves growing taller and more violent by the second.

“We should head in,” Mal says as he paddles over to me.

I shake my head, adrenaline coursing through my veins. “Just one more,” I grin, placing the board under me and paddling out away from him.

“Freya, now,” His voice is sharper, cutting through the growing wind.

But I’m already gone, chasing one last wave, the thrill of my new addiction too tempting to resist. A storm might be coming, but in this moment, I feel invincible.

I catch the wave, my body moving with the ocean as the seriously massive crest roars toward the shore. For a second, it’s perfect.

Until it’s not.

Gravity goes sideways and the wave crashes down around me, the wind whipping the water into a frenzy. I’m thrown from the board, tumbling beneath the surface, disoriented and gasping for air.

Panic surges through me as the storm hits in earnest. I try to surface, but the waves are relentless, dragging me under repeatedly, the board tied to my ankle jerking and yanking my leg. Just when I think I can't hold on any longer, strong arms wrap around me, pulling me up into the air.

Mal.

He hauls me onto his board, his eyes wild with fear and anger. "What the *hell* were you thinking?" he roars, but there's no time for a reply. The storm is here, and it's fucking *angry*.

The waves thunder around us as we paddle frantically toward the beach. We make it to shore just as the winds reach a fever pitch, the rain sheeting down. Mal grabs both boards, undoing the ankle straps, and we rush up the sand toward the Jeep. We're both yanking our wetsuits and swimsuits off when a sudden, violent cracking sound explodes through the night.

I whirl, screaming as a huge tree branch comes crashing down, smashing onto the parking lot right in front of the Jeep, boxing it in.

I shudder as the massive storm begins to rage and thunder around us. I glance around, looking for shelter, but there's nothing. Mal told me on the way that that's why he loves this beach—because it's so isolated, without even a single tacky surf bar.

"FREYA!"

Mal screams my name over the howling wind, the sky thundering and booming as the storm crashes against the shore. He grabs my hand, yanking me after him into the swirling winds as we stumble back down the beach, naked, wet, and scared.

Mal pulls me down into the space between two rock formations, shielding us from the worst of it. I can't tell if it's the wind or me screaming as his powerful arms wrap around me, his body pressed tightly to mine. His breath is ragged, his chest rising and falling as Hell on earth thunders around us.

"*Typhoon!*" he roars.

I cling to him desperately, like the winds might rip me away and suck me up into the storm itself. I look up at him, my heart pounding in my chest,

and something shifts between us. The storm is raging all around us, but all I can focus on is him—his ice-blue eyes, the way his hands grip me like he'll never let go.

And then, without thinking, I kiss him.

It's fierce and desperate, a kiss that says everything we've been unable to. The wind howls around us, the rain pelting our skin, the fury of nature herself screaming into our ears.

None of it matters.

Only *we* matter right now.

My tongue dances with his, my moans lost on the wind as I kiss him eagerly. His hands slide over my body, gripping the back of my neck and tangling in my wet hair. Grabbing my ass, his body rolling against mine.

I shiver, whimpering as I kiss him maniacally.

He's hard.

I'm wet, and it's not from the rain.

Mal growls into my mouth, biting and nipping at my lips as I reach between us and wrap my small fingers around his huge dick. His eyes snap to mine, his stormy, icy blue gaze locking on me as his lips curl dangerously.

We're the perfect blend of crazy.

Without thinking, forgetting the fact that we're in a fucking *typhoon* with Mother Nature attempting to wipe us off the face of the Earth, I slip my leg over him. Mal groans as I get on top, stroking his cock against my slick pussy before I center the head.

Fuucckk yesss…

I slide down onto him, feeling his fat cock impale me as he drives into me hard and deep. He grabs fists of my hair and my ass, bruising his lips to mine in a punishing, violent kiss as we start to rock together.

The storm thunders and roars around us. Rain crashes down on us as the wind rips and claws at our bodies. Lightning explodes across the sky, the

booming thunder rattling my very bones as my hips bounce and writhe and I grind on Mal's cock.

His mouth drops to my neck, biting so hard I swear he breaks the skin. His hands are all over me, rolling my nipples, twisting my piercings, grabbing my ass and pinning me to him as he thrusts up into me with a savagery that sends me reeling.

Lightning crashes again and the wind keeps howling like a banshee. Mal grabs my face, locking eyes with me, our lips an inch apart and our bodies slamming together over and over as I bounce and ride on his cock until the world turns blurry around me.

The sky rips in two. Thunder explodes in my very soul.

I scream as I let go and *come*.

Mal's mouth slams to mine, swallowing my cries as my pussy clamps down around him. The orgasm tears through me, and when he grips me tighter and groans into my lips, I gasp as I feel his cum spurt deep inside me.

The storm doesn't let up. Neither do we.

We just keep going.

And going.

And *going*.

Because out here at the edge of the world, in the middle of the Armageddon, with him…

I'm free.

And in this moment, we are *gods*.

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MAL

THE FIRE CRACKLES AND POPS, dancing in the dying wind.

The moon breaks through the last remnants of the clouds, turning everything silver—from the dark ocean that churns beyond the shore to the scattered rocks that dot the coastline. The air is still charged from the storm with an electricity that lingers between us, even as the winds have died down.

With the storm passed, I could easily get the Jeep out by driving over the sand and around the huge tree branch. But our clothes—at least, the few we even *found* after the wind died down—are soaked, and who wants to drive two hours in wet clothes?

I sit a few feet from Freya, tending the small campfire I built with scraps of driftwood collected from the beach. The fire crackles softly, sending a warm glow over her face as she wraps her arms around her knees, her naked body curled into a ball as she stares into the flames.

The quiet between us is comfortable, layered with a silence deeper than words. I poke at the fire, stirring the embers, trying to focus on something other than the way my heart is pounding from the way Freya looks in the soft light of the flames. Her hair is still damp, dark strands sticking to her face, and her pale skin has taken on a flushed warmth from being so close to the fire. I can’t take my eyes off her.

She glances over at me, her eyes catching the firelight, and there’s a softness in her gaze that makes my chest tighten. I’ve been trying to keep

things with her in a box—neatly compartmentalized, like everything in my life—but every time I'm around her, that box gets harder and harder to close.

"That was insane," she says quietly.

I grunt in agreement, throwing another piece of wood onto the fire. "Should've listened to me when I said to head in."

She smiles faintly, a flicker of mischief crossing her face. "Yeah, you should know by now that I *never* listen."

"No shit," I growl, smirking.

The truth is, I wouldn't want it any other way. I *like* her defiance, her stubbornness. That fire in her is what drew me in that very first night at the office where I found her.

She's not afraid of me like most people are. And that, paradoxically, scares the hell out of *me*, because I don't know how to protect her from the darkness inside me.

All I know is that something about her makes me want to let go—of all the control, all the walls, all the shit I've built up around myself for years.

She shifts a little closer to the fire, pulling her knees to her chest and resting her chin on top of them again.

"You were pretty great out there, you know," I say quietly.

She grins, her eyes raising to mine.

"Yeah?"

I nod.

"That why you brought me out here? To pump me up?"

I shake my head. "I wanted to show you something you'd never seen or done before."

Her lips twitch into a smile, and she looks out toward the ocean. "Well, mission definitely accomplished."

We sit in silence again, the fire crackling between us. I can feel her eyes on me, expectant. I know I should stay quiet, keep everything locked inside like I always do.

But I don't want to. Not anymore.

I take a deep breath, feeling the words clawing up my throat, finally escaping. "I was beaten, tortured, and molested for three years after my family died."

The words hang in the air between us, heavy and suffocating. I've never said them out loud before, not in a way that meant anything. But now, saying them here, to Freya, feels different. Like ripping open an old wound that never quite healed.

Freya doesn't say anything. But when I glance over, I see her staring at me with haunted sadness in her eyes. It's like she wants to comfort me, but also knows me well enough to know that's not what I want. I don't know how she does it, but there's no judgment in her gaze, or pity. Just…sadness.

Her lips quivers, her throat bobbing as her fingers twist together.

"After…"

Freya's face caves a little as she looks away.

After Freya's family murdered mine is the part left unsaid. But I don't look at her and see that now. That was her father and *his* violence and hatred.

Not *her*.

"My grandfather Kasper took me in. He was a *fiend* of a man."

I run a hand through my hair, staring into the fire as the horrendous memories start flooding back.

"Kasper was brutal, a Nazi. I mean a literal Nazi. He'd been a teenager when the Germans marched into Norway, and he *happily* swallowed their poison. Sixty years later, he was still waiting for a fucking Fourth Reich to rise up. He was a bastard, and he was obsessed with molding us into something that fit with his warped vision of the world."

She doesn’t say anything, but I can feel her watching me, her eyes boring into the side of my face.

“*Us*?” she finally says softly, her voice shaking.

“There were two other boys there with me—two other orphans that he’d taken in,” I say quietly. “Jonas and Filip. We were all just kids, but Kasper wanted to turn us into something else. Something dark.”

I take a deep breath, the weight of those days pressing down on me.

“All three of us took it differently. I just tried to survive. But Jonas… He became a true believer, just like Kasper. He was the favorite because he was as twisted and hateful as my grandfather was. Maybe he was just the best at pretending to be, so he’d be spared. But I doubt that was it. I think he had the same hate as Kasper.”

I pick up a piece of driftwood and feed it to the flames.

“Filip... He was too good. Too innocent. He couldn’t handle it, and my grandfather fucking knew it. He *enjoyed* that Filip broke so easily, and took pleasure in going the hardest on him. Beatings, psychological manipulation, torturing him…”

I look away.

“*Touching him*.”

A choked sob rips from Freya’s throat. I just stare into the crackling flames, feeling my blood slow like thick oil.

“One day, Kasper took things too far. Filip had committed the heinous crime of spilling some coffee on the kitchen floor while bringing it to my grandfather. So my grandfather dragged him out to the barn, hung him naked by the wrists from the rafters with his feet off the ground, and beat him with a bullwhip.”

My jaw clenches as the memory claws and rips at me.

“I can *still* hear the wet sounds of bloodied leather on torn skin.”

Freya sobs, crying into her hands as she stares at me in horror.

“He killed him,” I say quietly. “He just kept going and going, making Jonas and I watch until…” I look away. “It was over.”

Freya’s breath catches, and her eyes widen slightly, but she still doesn’t interrupt.

“I snapped, after that,” I say, my voice rougher, my fists clenched at my sides now. “Filip was the only friend I had, and when I saw that monster kill him for *nothing*, just because he could, I fucking broke. I grabbed a hay fork, and I ran that motherfucker through, four times.”

There’s a long silence after I finish speaking, the only sound the crackling of the fire and the distant crash of the waves. I glance over at Freya, expecting her to look at me differently now. But if anything, her expression is even softer, more understanding.

“Mal...”

With a choked sob, she falls into me, wrapping her arms around me and squeezing me half to death as she cries into my neck.

“*I’m so fucking sorry*…” she whispers hoarsely, her breath coming in huge, gulping sobs.

We sit like that for a while, just holding each other as the fire crackles and the waves crash. I feel her fingers playing across my skin and her throat bobbing against my shoulder.

I know her tells. She’s trying to figure out how to say something.

“Whatever it is,” I say quietly, “I want to hear it.”

She freezes.

“Tell me, Freya,” I murmur, turning to lift her chin, bringing her eyes to mine. I can see the sadness and fear in them. She’s worried. “You don’t have to hide from me,” I say quietly but insistently, watching her closely. “Not now.”

She glances up at me, looking lost and vulnerable in a way I’ve never seen before. For a long moment, she just stares at me, like she’s trying to decide if she should trust me with whatever is weighing her down.

“I have Huntington’s disease,” she finally says, her voice barely above a whisper. “It’s genetic. My father and my brother had it, and I have it too. It means I’m going to die young.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut, stunning me with their sheer weight and finality. I stare at her, my throat tight, a fury I don’t understand roaring in my veins as I try to process what she’s just told me.

“The neurons in my brain… They’ll start to break down and die at some point. Some people live until their fifties, but mine, like my father’s, is going to progress a lot faster than that. It’ll probably first hit me in a few years. And then, it will kill me.”

My throat closes off. My pulse claws through my veins like grit, slowing down until all I know is the sheer unfairness of it.

Something inside me breaks. My arms wrap tighter around her, holding her close against my chest as if I can protect her from the inevitable. She’s shaking, her breath coming in short, uneven gasps, and I can feel her tears soaking into my shirt.

“I didn’t want you to know I was going to die,” she blurts, her voice muffled against my chest. “I didn’t want you to look at me differently. I didn’t want you to feel sorry for me or pity me.”

There’s a long silence.

Then I shake my head, my thumb brushing gently across her cheek. “We’re all going to die,” I say quietly. My eyes and my fingers trail down her side, until my thumb brushes over the tattoo on her ribs.

“That’s why you got this, isn’t it?” I trace the pad of my thumb over her tattoo. “Remember that you must die.”

She nods, her lips quivering.

“Well, you told me yourself that there’s another half to that saying,” I say fiercely, my voice quiet but firm. “Memento *Vivere*. Remember to *live*.”

She looks up at me, her breath catching in her throat.

“*Live*, Freya,” I hiss darkly, holding her face tightly in my hands, our eyes locked. “We live for *right fucking now*. For today. Not tomorrow. Not yesterday. Just…now.”

Her arms wrap around me, pulling me closer as our lips crush together, the fire crackling beside us.

I’ve been fighting my whole life. I know I can’t fight death, or the inevitable.

But that sure as fuck isn’t going to stop me from trying.

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FREYA

THE DRIVE back to Kyoto is long, but I don't mind. The windows are down, and the post-storm night air whips through my hair as Mal navigates the twisting mountain roads with an ease that leaves me both comforted and exhilarated.

The storm is over, but there's a quiet aftermath in my chest that lingers. Mal and I sat by that fire for another two hours, just talking and spilling all our secrets to each other, the heat of our confessions burning away the last vestiges of the walls I'd built so carefully around myself.

I grin in the dark silence when I feel Mal's hand reach over to take mine. He doesn't say a word, and I just let myself sink into this feeling, loving the way his touch grounds me and makes everything else fade away.

But there's also a restless energy I've been feeling since we were out on the water, surfing before the storm. Something throbbing just beneath the surface, urging me to move, to *do* something.

"I'm not ready to go back," I whisper.

Mal's brow arches as he glances at me. "We don't have to."

I turn to face him, my eyes searching his. "I want to do something reckless," I say, the words tumbling out before I can stop them. "Something wild. I need to feel alive."

"I know a place."

WE BYPASS THE MORI HOUSE, and instead drive down into the city itself, to the Higashiyama district. The buildings around us grow older, their traditional wooden facades casting long shadows over the narrow streets. We wind through the maze of Kyoto's back alleys, the sounds of the city turning quiet, as if we've gone back in time.

Finally, Mal pulls up outside a small, unassuming building with a traditional *kirizuma* gabled roof, a small fountain, and a garden beside the few steps up to the side door.

There's a red lantern hanging above the doorway swaying slightly in the breeze, the only sign of life in this otherwise hidden corner of the city.

I have no idea where we are, or what we're about to do. Mal called someone on the way, but the whole conversation was in Japanese and he wouldn't tell me a thing.

"What is this place?" I ask curiously.

Mal steps out of the Jeep, his eyes never leaving mine as he walks around to my side. He opens the door for me, extending his hand, and I feel a rush of anticipation as I take it.

"Tattoo parlor," he says simply. "One of the oldest in Kyoto. The man who runs it now is a *twelfth*-generation tattoo artist."

My heart skips as I look up at the ancient building. A nervous energy throbs through me. But I grin and let it take hold.

Good. I want that rush. I want that energy flowing through my veins.

The warmth of Mal's hand in mine grounds me as he leads me up the stairs and knocks softly on the door. A second later, it opens, revealing a man not much older than Mal, with long hair pulled up into a bun on top of his head, and a myriad of gorgeous, traditional *irezumi* tattoos covering his neck and arms.

"*Mal*," he grins, opening the door wider.

“Hanzō,” Mal beams. “Thanks for seeing us at such a late hour.”

The man bows his head. “Of course, my friend,” he purrs in a beautifully accented voice. He turns to smile at me as he takes my hand. “And you are?”

“Freya.”

“Mine.”

Mal and I both answer at the same time, though our delivery is a little different. I say my name with a kind smile. Mal announces I am his with a dark edge in his voice.

Hanzō chuckles, releasing my hand and backing away with his hands raised.

“Well,” he chuckles. “That renders my next question of how you know each other unnecessary.” He turns and shakes his head. “Still the same Mal, I see.”

I snort. “Exactly how many girls has he brought here?”

Hanzō laughs as he turns and ushers us into the shop. “This grumpy motherfucker?” He makes a face. “I’m surprised he even knew how to *talk* to a woman.”

I grin, feeling my cheeks heat as Mal sighs.

“But I know him well enough to know he doesn’t tend to share.”

We follow Hanzō through the interior of the dimly lit shop until we get to a little room filled with incense, the walls covered in traditional art, with a Buddha statue against the far one. It’s dark in here, too, but one focused light hangs down low over a tattooing chair and a table full of tools. I recognize the tattoo gun, but not the small bundles of little sticks also laid out.

“*Tebori* technique,” Hanzō grunts, nodding at the bundles. “The old way, like stick-and-poke.”

My eyes widen a little. Getting tattooed *literally* by hand, having someone repeatedly jamming a tiny bundle of needles into your skin sounds hardcore, even to me.

Hanzō chuckles. “I think tonight, we stick to the modern way.”

Mal gestures for me to sit and I do, my heart pounding in my chest as Hanzō prepares his tools. I swallow hard, the weight of what we’re about to do settling over me.

“Mal told me you have other ink already.”

I nod, lifting my shirt up over my ribs. A low growl emanates from Mal, who looks like he’s as pleased with me showing this small bit of skin to Hanzō as he’d be watching me blow the guy.

“Really?” I snicker, rolling my eyes at him.

He grunts, eyeing me with a tightness in his jaw. But after a few seconds, he lets it go.

“What do you think you’d like to get?” Mal asks, his voice quiet.

I chew on my lip as I glance around the room, eying the *stunning* art all over the walls: traditional *hannya* masks, *onis*, kitsune foxes, lettering, dragons, swords, and fish.

“I feel like I should get something Japanese, being here. But…” I shrug. “I don’t know. That also feels inauthentic. Or like, appropriation.”

Hanzō smiles, shaking his head. “Cultures and traditions are our own. We all have different ones. These,” he says, gesturing to his arms and the gorgeous, swirling *irezumi* style ink all over them, “are mine. That is yours,” he continues, pointing to the *Memento Mori* on my ribs. “If you’re asking if I take exception to you honoring my traditions, I don’t. In fact, I welcome you to.”

I nod, mulling it over.

“What about both. Your traditions and mine.”

Hanzō smiles. “I like it.”

I glance at Mal before I look back to Hanzō. “What about *Memento Vivere* underneath the Memento Mori.”

Hanzō nods.

“And then…” I chew on my lip before I glance back at him. “What would you pick? For the Japanese.”

Hanzō frowns. He takes a full minute, scanning his wall of art, tapping his finger on his chin before he turns back to me. His dark eyes search mine, like he’s reading my history.

“You’re brave,” he says quietly. “And you’ve overcome much.”

My mouth twists into an embarrassed smile as I lift a shoulder. “Oh, I don’t know about—”

“She has,” Mal growls.

I glance at him and grin.

“A koi fish, then,” Hanzō nods. “It represents perseverance.”

“Perfect,” I say quietly. “Where?”

Hanzō smiles. “Ahh, now that is the important question. Traditionally,” he says slowly, “the fish swimming upstream, up the arm, represents a personal journey; growth and resilience. On the back, it means determination and a sense of personal self-power.”

I answer without even thinking.

“Do you have time to do both?”

Hanzō nods, glancing at Mal. “I have a room downstairs, without windows. It’s not a hotel, but you’re welcome to stay the day there after the sun rises.”

Oh. Apparently, part of that phone call in Japanese involved Mal telling Hanzō about my condition.

Mal nods.

“Thank you, Hanzō,” I say quietly.

He turns back to me and smiles. “Of course. In that case, we have plenty of time.” He glances back at Mal. “What about you? Are we finding some empty space on you tonight?”

Mal nods, his eyes darting to mine. “Yeah.”

“Have you decided what you’ll be getting?”

“The same,” Mal says quietly, looking right at me. “Memento Mori, Memento Vivere, and the two koi fish.”

Hanzō grins widely. “I’m so glad you called. This will be a fun one. Let’s begin.” He starts to ready his tools and the ink. Then, as he’s pulling on his gloves, he chuckles as he glances at Mal. “Do I need to worry about my personal safety? You understand that tattooing her means I’ll need to touch her.”

Mal looks like he’s swallowing raw sewage as his jaw works and his face sours. I laugh and slap his hip. Finally, he uncoils a little, his body visibly relaxing.

“Fine,” he grunts. “But only because I trust you.”

Hanzō chuckles. “Like I said. He doesn’t tend to share.”

Mal moves to stand beside me, his presence steady and grounding as Hanzō begins the lettering on my ribs. The needle buzzes softly, and the familiar sting of ink being pressed permanently into my skin brings both pain and a rush of adrenaline. I watch as the words take shape, a constant reminder etched onto my body.

Memento Vivere.

Remember to live.

When Hanzō finishes, I look down at my skin, at the way the two phrases sit perfectly balanced: a reminder of death, but also of life.

A vow to myself that I won’t waste what time I have left.

After Hanzō wraps and tapes the new ink, I step into the next room to change out of my shirt and into a hospital gown that Hanzō gives me. It’s

sleeveless, for the work on my arm, and the back opens, for when we move on to that.

Hanzō draws the koi with a pen, moving up my triceps toward my shoulder, and then starts to prepare the tattoo gun again.

“Wait.”

He stops when I open my mouth, raising his eyes to mine.

“What if…” I chew on my lip for a second before my resolve hardens. “Could we do the koi the old way? The *tebori* technique?”

Hanzō pauses, his eyes locked with mine, peering into me as if he’s reading me again.

“I’ve had it done,” Mal says quietly. “It’s pretty raw, Freya.”

I turn to glance up at him. “Think I can handle it?”

He doesn’t even hesitate.

“I know you can.”

With a small smile, I turn and nod at Hanzō. He dips his chin and then puts the tattoo gun down. I watch as he readies the bundles of sharp sticks, which he tells me are called *nomi*.

“Tattoo guns hurt at first,” Hanzō says. “But I find that they eventually numb you as the work progresses.”

I literally just experienced that exact phenomenon. Initially, my ribs *hurt*. But after the first few letters of the new memento vivere tattoo, the area did seem to numb.

Hanzō’s face grows serious. “The *nomi* will not numb you,” he says quietly. “Mal is correct. This will be painful.”

“I don’t mind.”

Just the same, I welcome the feel of Mal’s fingers tangling with mine and squeezing as Hanzō leans in.

“Let’s begin.”

He’s right. It hurts like a *motherfucker*. I feel each and every little prick of the *nomi* breaking my skin as the koi on my arm beings to take shape.

But while it never turns numb, in a way, the pain becomes a sort of cleansing, mediative thing. Idon’t try to block it out, because that would be impossible. Instead, I breathe deeply and welcome it in. I let it burn its way through me, until there’s nothing left to catch fire. And it’s there that I find a strange sort of peace.

I end up taking a break after the first koi, because my arm is shaking. Hanzō cleans and wraps that piece before I slide out of the chair to grab some water.

“I’ll start in on you while she rests,” Hanzō says to Mal.

Wordlessly, Mal nods. He pulls off his shirt without hesitation, exposing the tattoos that already cover his chest and arms. His body is a canvas of ink, each mark a story, a piece of his life.

Tonight, he’ll add a new story.

One we wrote together.

I watch in silence as Mal takes his seat, ready to have his skin marked with the same reminders that now sit on mine. He and Hanzō go over the limited open spaces on his skin and decide on an empty spot down the back of each triceps for *memento mori* and *memento vivere*. Hanzō draws an intricate koi swimming upstream through the sea of tattoos already occupying most of Mal’s forearm and manages to find space on his back for the second.

Like me, they do the Latin lettering first. Then Hanzō moves on to the *tebori*-style koi on Mal’s forearm. After that, I’m still shaking a little bit from mine. So Hanzō does the koi on Mal’s back as I hold his hand—I think more for me than him.

“We can finish another time,” Mal growls quietly, looking at me with concern after Hanzō finishes cleaning and wrapping his new back piece.

I shake my head. “No. Tonight. I can take it.”

Hanzō eyes me, then he nods solemnly. “I think she can, too.”

So I lie on my front on the chair, holding Mal’s hands in both of mine as Hanzō starts in on my back.

Hanzō’s shop is still dark, but the clock on the wall tells me it’s well past sunrise by the time we’re done. I’m shaking and my head spins a little as I get out of the chair. But there’s a vivid energy inside me that throbs and pulses with every breath and step.

I thank Hanzō profusely, and he tells me it was his absolute pleasure. Then he leads us downstairs to the windowless room to rest. He’s right, it’s no hotel suite. But there’s a little cot nestled amongst the shelves of supplies.

That’s more than enough.

When we’re alone, Mal and I stand in front of a mirror on the wall, eying the new lines of text on our skin. There’s a moment of stillness between us, heavy with meaning.

“Now there’s no excuse,” he says, his voice low and rough. “We both remember to live.”

I reach out, tracing my fingers a few inches from the fresh ink on his arm. He catches my hand, pulling me closer until I’m standing against him, looking up into those ice-blue eyes.

“Thank you,” I whisper quietly. “For this. For everything.”

He doesn’t say anything, just pulls me into him, making me feel like I belong there. And for the first time in a long while, I’m not afraid of the future. I’m not afraid of what’s lurking, waiting for me.

Because for now, in this moment, I’m living.

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FREYA

I STRETCH out on the couch, my body still abuzz. My skin feels raw, a mix of lingering cold from the ocean, the memory of Mal's touch…

And, of course, my new tattoos.

My thoughts swirl as violently as the waves the other night, my pulse thudding like the thunder that crashed around us while we came together.

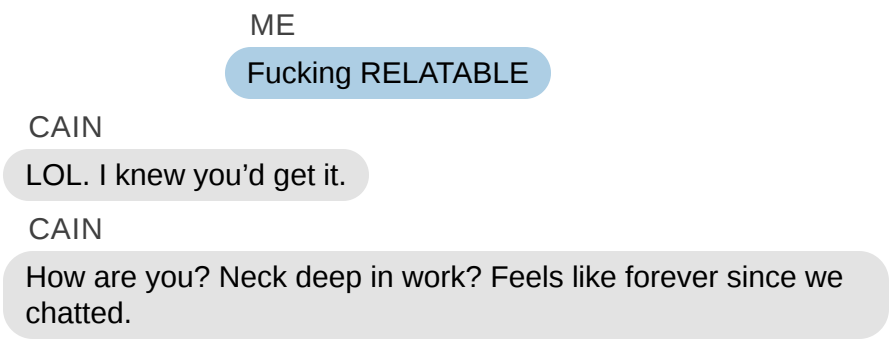
I mean…*shit*.

Maybe not something I'd be insane enough to try again, but let's see anyone else top "fucking in a typhoon" the next time "wildest story" comes up.

The fantasy replay evaporates as my phone dings.

Cain.

I open our chat and smirk at the last message she's just sent. It's a meme about trying to fix broken code at 3 AM—the kind of thing that always makes me laugh.



I smile as I type a reply.

ME

Lol. Actually, not work…

I hesitate. Part of me wants to spill everything—to tell her about the storm, the wild night, how Mal makes me feel like I'm both invincible and on the edge of falling in the most amazing way.

But that's not really my style, and besides, how do you even explain something like that? It's too raw, too... private.

CAIN

This sounds juicy

ME

Lol. Let's just say I had a great night. Did something reckless that ended up being super fun.

CAIN

Ooo, cryptic! Love it! Reckless how?

I smile at the curiosity behind her words but decide to keep my answer vague. I mean, spilling personal things to Annika is one thing. She's like a sister. Cain, much as I have come to like her, is not.

ME

It involved water, wind, and a serious adrenaline rush.

There's a pause. I picture Cain sitting at her laptop, working on some obscure project or hacking into a system just for fun. A moment later, her reply pops up.

CAIN

Riding the wave of chaos, huh? Gotta respect that energy.

It's followed by a wave emoji.

ME

You have no idea how accurate that is right now.

CAIN

Wait seriously?? You actually went surfing??!

ME

Girl, I thought I was going to DROWN. But it was soooo much fun.

CAIN

So cool! I've always wanted to try. Too scared though, lol!

ME

That was me! But I got convinced. Guess I'm living recklessly these days.

CAIN

Damn, girl. Reckless is good, but remember, no lifeguards out there in the real world. Don't go overboard!

I shake my head, amused at how close she is to describing *exactly* what went down last night. She's not wrong—there were definitely no lifeguards in the storm, just me and Mal and the crazy ocean. I appreciate the concern, even if it's wrapped in playful banter.

ME

I'll try not to drown. Promise.

CAIN

Good. Would hate to lose my new code-breaking buddy to a rogue wave.

I laugh softly, thinking back to the dark waves, the howling wind, and the way the world felt both alive and dangerous. My fingers hover over the screen for a moment before I type out my last reply.

ME

Trust me, the waves were worth it.

CAIN

Glad to hear it. Now get back to shore before you end up in a tsunami or something.

I put my phone down and lean back against the couch, my thoughts drifting. My heart is still thrumming with the energy from last night, the intensity of everything that happened. But this conversation with Cain has been a good distraction, a way to pull me back to normalcy, even if just for a while.

I might be living on borrowed time. But right now, I'm riding the waves, and I'm not ready to stop.

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MAL

THE MORNING LIGHT filters around the edges of the blackout curtains, bathing Freya's sleeping form in a soft, golden glow.

In the last week, I've had the window glass replaced with special UV-blocking glass usually used by chemical labs and art museums. If she's going to be staying here—and she *is* going to be staying here—then I want her safe and protected.

She's curled up beside me, her breathing steady and slow, the blanket only just covering her bare shoulder. I watch the gentle rise and fall of her chest, feeling the steady pull of something I don't have a name for.

My fingers move without thinking, brushing over her cheekbone. She shifts slightly at my touch, murmuring something in her sleep, but doesn't wake. There's a peace in her face I don't see when she's awake—a fragile quiet that doesn't exist in our chaotic world—and I know, deep down, it's my job to protect it.

I won't call this what it probably is. I can't. A broken part of me won't let me say the word or accept the emotion. But I'm in deep with her—deeper than I've ever let myself get with anyone.

It should scare me. And it does, I suppose, a little. But I can't pull away. Not now. Not when every minute I spend with her feels like a lifeline.

I trace the curve of her jaw with the back of my hand, careful not to wake her. I hate that I can't protect her from all of it. Not from the past, nor from

the future unknown.

But I'll try. For her, I'll try.

My phone vibrates on the nightstand, shattering the quiet of the room. I pull my hand back from Freya's face, glancing down at the screen.

Oren.

I slide out of bed carefully, grabbing the phone and shutting the door softly behind me. Downstairs, I slip out onto the patio, and answer.

"Find anything?"

Oren's voice is low. "Yeah. You might want to sit down."

He exhales, the kind of exhale that tells me he's dug up something that maybe should have stayed buried.

"William Lindqvist and Kir Nikolayev worked together briefly—back when the Nikolayev Bratva was first expanding internationally. *Way* before… what happened to your family. It's not in any official records, but the underground channels talk."

I stay where I am, barely breathing. "Go on."

"That alliance between Kir and William ended fast. Something personal got in the way. *That*, I can't seem to find anything on. Which is strange. But… They didn't just cut ties, Mal. Lindqvist put out a fucking hit on Kir. A big one. Thirty mil."

Fuck.

My grip tightens on the phone. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. It wasn't just business, Mal. *No one* contracts for anywhere near that amount for just business unless we're talking a head of state or something. This was something personal. William wanted Kir dead, and he wanted it bad."

I stand, pacing. "So what happened?"

“He never succeeded, obviously,” Oren says with a low chuckle. “Kir’s still alive, and William’s not. But the trail goes murky. After the hit was placed, the bad blood between them grew, but then went silent after your family’s massacre. As if someone wanted the whole thing wiped from memory.”

A knot tightens in my gut. “What do you mean, silent?”

“No more chatter. No more attempts on Kir’s life. It was like Lindqvist gave up on the idea.”

“*Why?*”

There’s a long pause, as Oren hesitates before continuing. “I don’t have all the answers, Mal. And it’s rare that I’ll say that. But whatever went down between Kir and Lindqvist was buried deeper than most of my usual channels go. And whatever it was, it can’t have been pretty.”

My mind races through the possibilities. “Anything else? Anything that ties Kir back to what happened to my family?”

He was there.

Watching the blood pool. Watching my childhood turn to ash.

“Not yet. I’m still digging. When I find anything, you’ll be the first to know. Be careful, Mal.”

The line goes dead, and I stand there for a long moment, staring into space.

William Lindqvist wanted Kir dead. That changes—well, not everything. But something. I just don’t know what.

Lindqvist had my family brutally killed and their home destroyed. I’ve spent *decades* thinking Kir’s presence in the aftermath suggested he was a part of it or overseeing it all.

But now…

Why the fuck would Lindqvist want Kir dead, and why the fuck did he not care anymore after that horrible day?

The questions burn, the weight of them settling in my chest. I turn and slip back inside to go back up to bed. I’ve become almost as nocturnal as Freya.

Just as I step into the great room, the bedroom door upstairs on the balcony creaks open, and Freya steps out, her face soft in the low light of the room. She's wrapped in the duvet from my bed, her hair tied back loosely, and she flashes me a sleepy smile that tugs at something deep in my gut.

"Hey," she murmurs. "Everything okay?"

I nod, forcing a smile, my thoughts still tangled in Oren's words. I lift my phone. "Yeah. Just work."

Freya pads down the stairs and walks over to me, her presence grounding me in a way that both comforts and unnerves me. "You're always working."

I meet her halfway across the room, once again thankful for the UV-blocking windows. I catch her hand and pull her with me onto the couch, tugging her into my lap. But as much as I want to lose myself in her right now, or fucking *devour* her, the conversation with Oren lingers like a shadow.

She tilts her head, studying me with those sharp eyes of hers. "You *sure* you're okay?"

I don't answer right away. Instead, I just press my lips to the side of her neck, inhaling the soft scent of her skin, letting it calm the storm inside me, if only for a second. I nip her skin with my teeth—not savagely like I sometimes do, but enough to make her gasp sharply.

"I'm good," I murmur against her skin. "Just tired."

Freya leans into me, her fingers tracing light circles along the back of my neck. "We should both be in bed."

Her voice is soft, tentative, like she's trying to gauge where my head's at. But I can't tell her everything. Not yet. Kir's her family. And I won't taint that until I know for sure what the fuck all of this means.

"*Or* we could just go to bed," I growl quietly. "And I don't mean to sleep."

Freya grins, her lips curving in that way that always gets to me, and for a moment, the world feels lighter. But even as I hold her, my thoughts return

to The Lindqvists and Kir. William's vendetta. There's something I'm not seeing yet.

"Hey," Freya whispers, her hand sliding down my chest. "You're distracted."

I exhale slowly, brushing a thumb over her lips. "Just thinking."

"About?"

I could tell her. She *arguably does* have a right to know, considering that this is tangled up in both the toxic family she was born into and the one she found later.

But, no. I bite it back, locking it away with the rest of the shit I haven't told her yet.

"It's nothing," I lie. "Just dumb work shit."

But deep down, I know this isn't over.

The past never stays buried. It *always* comes back to haunt you.

It's only a matter of when.

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FREYA

"FREYA?"

I startle from my thoughts, glancing up over the rim of my coffee to Kir and Damian, sitting across the table from me. We're sitting outside a little coffee and tea shop near the Philosopher's Path bridge, between Kyoto University and Higashiyama Jisho-ji, the famous Zen temple.

Kir and I are sipping coffee. Damian has a neon pink bubble tea sitting in front of him that looks ridiculously comical against his formidable and downright dangerous appearance.

Kir arches a brow at me as I blush and clear my head.

He and Damian are leaving for New York today. Part of me feels bad that I haven't spent as much time as I could have with them while they're here. Even when I have—like right now—it's been hard to focus on anything else when Mal is so deeply rooted in my thoughts.

In my *everything*.

"The server…yeah." I frown, setting my cup down. "It *does* look like someone definitely tried to get in. They didn't *fully* succeed, but the fact that they even got close is concerning. Whoever it was, they're *good*. Really good, actually."

I scowl. I mean I *built* Kir's network, from the ground up, layering his cybersecurity myself. For someone to even be able to *attempt* to breach it is

troubling. Maybe I'll reach out to Cain and see if I can bounce some ideas off her.

"Did they get anything?" Kir asks quietly, his voice laced with tension.

I shake my head. "Nothing was copied or downloaded that I could see. But I'm going to massively reinforce everything. Whoever it was, they're good. I'm not taking any chances."

Kir lets out a low breath, his shoulders relaxing just a fraction. "All right. Keep me posted."

Kir excuses himself to the bathroom. Damian stays silent, his purplish gaze stabbing into me until I can't take it anymore.

I exhale with a sigh. "Okay, *what*."

His brows furrows. "I'm not going to hold back, Frey."

I smirk. "Do you ever? Fine. As if I don't already know what's bugging you: proceed."

"Okay, fine. I don't like your psycho fucking boyfriend, there-I've-said-it."

I roll my eyes. "Mal's not a psycho boyfriend."

Damian raises an eyebrow. "*Highly* disagree."

I glare at him as he smiles smugly and spreads his arms.

"What?" he counters. "You're telling me the guy doesn't give you psycho vibes at all?"

"Damian…" I fix him with a look, and he sighs heavily. "Do you trust me?"

He smirks, already knowing where I'm going with this. "Of course."

"Then trust that I know what I'm doing," I say, holding his gaze. "And trust that *I trust* Mal. Implicitly."

"You know what he does for the Mori family, right?"

I groan. "Are we seriously doing this? Do you know what *you* do for *our* family? What I do? Welcome to the fucking criminal world, Damian. We all

do not-so-nice—”

“He infiltrates,” Damian growls. “He gets into places or systems no one else can, or he *breaks people* no one else can, all to get what he needs.”

“You break people’s *faces* to get what you need,” I snap back.

“I’m just *warning* someone I care for,” he growls. “Aka *you*, about *Mal*!”

“Damian!!”

I stand abruptly, my hands balled to fists. Damian frowns, realizing just how far he’s pushed me. He takes a breath, exhaling slowly as he shoves his fingers through his silvery hair.

“I’m just worried about you, Frey,” he mutters, calmer now. “C’mon, sit. Please.”

I grit my teeth, but I do, sitting back down and glaring at him.

“I’m going to ask you one more time,” I say quietly. “Do you trust me?”

He nods. “I do. With my life, actually.”

“Well…” I spread my arms. “I *do* actually know what I’m doing, Damian.”

“And what’s that?”

“*Living*,” I murmur. “And it feels pretty fucking good.”

Damian’s jaw clenches for a second before he finally relents. “Fine. But I still don’t like the guy.”

I shrug. “You don’t have to like him. You just have to trust me when I say he’s not a monster.”

At least, if he is…

He’s *my* monster—fierce and protective, yet somehow also incredibly tender.

Damian sighs again as he glances back at me. “All right, all right. I’m done. We cool?”

“Pay off my outstanding room service tabs at the Chelsea, Greenwich, and Crosby Street Hotels when you get back to New York, and yeah,” I smirk. “We’ll be good.”

“You’re a dick.”

“I’m gonna miss you, too, Damian.”

Kir gets back from the restroom, and I ride with the two of them to the private airstrip, giving them each a huge hug before they get on the jet back to New York.

And then they’re gone, leaving me standing on the tarmac, feeling empty inside. I hate goodbyes, even when I know they’re temporary.

When I get back home—which feels oddly easy to say these days—I feel the familiar rush of Mal’s presence before I even see him.

He’s there, waiting, his eyes locked on mine the moment I step through the door. Before I can say anything, he grabs me, pulling me close and kissing me hard, a kiss of fire. I can’t help the way my body reacts to him, the way my heart pounds in my chest as I cling to him, letting him take control in a way only he can.

He pulls back just enough to look into my eyes, his gaze searching mine. “Something’s wrong,” he murmurs.

“*No*,” I whisper, shaking my head, breathless from the intensity of his stare. “I just need you.”

He pins me harder to the wall, his cock surging thick, pulsing against me as my knees shake with anticipation.

“How?” he growls, his voice rough.

“*Hard*,” I whisper back, barely able to speak. “Rough.” I tremble as I lean up into the crook of his neck, my lips brushing his ear as his hands tighten around me. “*Make it hurt.*”

Without another word, he grabs me again, lifting me into his arms and carrying me toward the bedroom. My heart races, knowing what’s coming,

knowing that this is where we both thrive—in this mad, mad world of our own creation.

A world so good it takes my breath away.

WHEN I WAKE UP, it's still light outside, though the sun is starting to dip behind the mountains. I turn over, smiling to myself as I watch Mal sleep beside me. He's adjusted to my nocturnal schedule. I never asked him to, or even suggested it. It just…happened.

Now he's a vampire, just like me.

Quietly, I slip out of bed and head to the kitchen for some water. As I drink, I decide to check the output from the diagnostic I ran on Kir's home system, plus I want to see if Cain got back to me with any ideas on the attempted break-in.

I grab my laptop from the table and plop down on the couch. When I open it, though, I realize it's not mine. It's Mal's.

Oops.

I'm about to close it when a document open on the screen catches my eye, grabbing me like claws around the throat, making my heart stop.

Intel report: Kir Nikolayev

Exploration and deep dive into possible connections between Kir Nikolayev and Lindqvist crime family

I stare at the screen in disbelief, my eyes racing over the words.

It's not just this one document—there's a folder of them, each more damning than the last. The headings alone make my stomach churn: *Surveillance Logs*, *Bratva-Lindqvist Family Ties*, *Suspected Hits Orchestrated by K. Nikolayev*. There's a timestamp on a file that dates back almost twenty years outlining a failed hit on Kir—organized by none other than *my father*, William Lindqvist.

I scroll down. My fingers are shaking, but I can’t stop. I have to know more. The words blur together as I read.

Report Summary: Evidence suggests Kir Nikolayev may have been a key player in the Lindqvist family and empire’s downfall, beginning with his severed ties to William Lindqvist. Historical records indicate that Kir may have orchestrated retaliation, resulting in William Lindqvist’s downfall and ultimately that of his criminal empire.

Possible Motive: Betrayal by Petra Lindqvist, an affair with Kir Nikolayev—

Wait, WHAT.

Fucking *what*?!

Kir and my mother? That’s impossible. That can’t be real.

I scroll faster, a sick need clawing at me to uncover every horrible detail. Then I freeze.

Focal Subject: Freya Lindqvist, aka Freya Holm

My own name leaping out at me from the page is a slap to the face. My heart pounds in my chest, the air around me suddenly too thick, too suffocating.

My blood runs cold as I read the detailed profile on me, my mind recoiling from the clinical dissection of my life:

Subject identified as a close associate to Kir Nikolayev, raised within Lindqvist family. Potential asset due to proximity to Nikolayev. Recommend utilizing emotional connection to gain access to Nikolayev’s personal dealings. Close bond between subject and target could prove invaluable in gathering intelligence and leveraging control over Nikolayev.

The words *potential*, *asset*, and *utilize emotional connection* burn into my brain.

I’m nothing more than a pawn.

Every moment I've spent with Mal—everything we've shared—has been nothing more than cold, calculated tactics.

Lies.

A thousand horrible thoughts flood my mind at once, twisting and curdling inside my chest, filling me with dread. Is this what I've been to him? Every touch, every kiss, every whispered, whimpered, gasp just a way for him to get closer to *Kir*?

I feel sick.

The bile rises in my throat, but I'm unable to stop staring at the screen.

There are legit *surveillance photos*—blurry images of me taken in various places over the last few months. Outside Kir's mansion, at that restaurant in Tokyo, even a shot of me leaving a bar with Damian. There's a red circle drawn around me in each one, highlighting me as the target.

There's a final line in bold that seals it, making my skin crawl.

Freya Lindqvist may be the key to unraveling Kir Nikolayev's operation. Recommend full investigation into familial ties.

I can't fucking breathe.

I slam the laptop shut, my fingers trembling, nausea rolling over me in waves.

"Freya…"

I whirl at the sound of his voice, instantly scrambling off the couch. Mal's standing in the doorway, his expression dark and lined.

"That isn't—"

"*What it looks like*?!" I scream. "Then what *is it*, Mal?!"

"Freya…" His voice is low, almost pleading. "Let me—"

"WHAT. FUCKING. IS. THIS. MAL!!" I scream again, my heart breaking as I stare at him. My vision blurs with tears. It feels like poison is roaring through my veins, spreading pestilence to every single corner of my being.

He hesitates for a second. “I was looking into theories, that’s all,” Mal says quietly, his voice tight with restraint. “I needed to know the truth about Kir. About your family—”

“About *my* family?!” I gape at him, my voice laced with disbelief. “You seriously believe all of this?!”

Mal looks away, his jaw tight. “Not *all* of it.”

“You really think Kir had something to do with your family’s deaths.”

“I…might.”

The room spins, until I feel like I’m going to collapse under the weight of everything. “Is *that* why you got close to me?!” I choke, my voice trembling. “Was this all just some way to get to fucking *Kir*?”

“*No*,” he growls quickly. “No, Freya, I wasn’t—”

“You were!” I scream, my chest heaving. “You’ve been watching me and investigating me my entire life! *Plotting* against me and my fucking family!”

Mal’s face contorts with frustration, struggling for words. “Freya, you have to understand—”

“I *trusted* you!” My voice breaks, the tears finally spilling over. I wipe them away angrily, hating that he’s seeing me weak and vulnerable like this. “Was any of this *real*, Mal?! Or was I just part of your plan?”

“Freya, *listen to me*,” Mal says, his voice raw with emotion. He takes a step closer, reaching out for me. “You have to believe me.”

I *don’t* believe him. I can’t. Not now. So as he moves toward me, reaching for me, I do something I never do when it comes to him.

I move away.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” I hiss, my heart shattering with every word. “I need you to leave,” I whisper hoarsely, my voice breaking.

Mal shakes his head. “I’m not doing that.”

“*Leave*.” I hiss. “Get out.”

“I’m not fucking leaving until I can explain,” Mal growls, his voice tense.

“There’s nothing *to* explain,” I whisper, my voice hollow. “You’ve said enough. *Done* enough.”

Mal’s jaw clenches, still standing there, his chest rising and falling with each ragged breath, his hand still outstretched. His eyes, once so cold and unreadable, are filled with something raw now—something desperate.

“Freya, I love you.”

I break completely. I start sobbing, unable to stop. My entire world wrenches sideways as I flounder and stagger back from him.

“*Leave*—”

“There’s not a chance in *hell*,” he growls firmly, “that I’m walking out—”

“If you don’t,” I whisper. “*I will*.”

The room goes silent.

We both see the daylight streaming in from outside through the UV-blocking windows. He knows the threat I just made.

“Freya…” Mal says quietly. “Just—”

“*Neon*.”

Everything goes still and quiet.

“*Neon*,” I choke out again in a whisper.

My lip quivers. Tears bead in the corners of my eyes as they lock with Mal’s.

And then, without another word, he turns and walks out.

The door shuts quietly behind him, leaving me to collapse in tears, my heart shattered into a thousand pieces.

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FREYA

FOR THE LAST THREE DAYS, I've been hiding, hoping that if I avoid the world long enough, it'll forget I exist. *Mal* certainly has. He's disappeared: no messages, no calls, nothing—like he melted into the ether after our blow-up, leaving nothing but empty space where he used to be.

Even if it hurts, I know that was what I had to do.

Cut ties. Walk away. Forget.

I've done it a million times before for a million different reasons. Why should this time be any different?

Because the times before didn't involve leaving the man you might just love.

I grit my teeth, refusing to allow that thought any purchase in my head. I *will not* think that word about someone who could stab me in the back like that. Who would carve their way into my heart as a means to an end.

Who would *use me* like that, so easily, without any remorse.

"So… You're really going back tomorrow?"

I pull myself from my misery long enough to glance over and nod glumly at Annika. Her master suite in the main house has become my safe haven for the last three days. Which, yes, means I've essentially kicked Kenzo out of his own bed.

I do feel kind of awful about that, even if Annika's told me a hundred times that he's a big boy and can sleep on the couch, or in any of the *four* guest rooms in their palatial home.

But I know she's just saying that to make me feel better and to try and lighten the mood for my moody, heartbroken ass. She's my ride-or-die like that.

She's also been the only one who *leaves* the room—to get us food and snacks, drinks, clean towels, that sort of thing. I mean, I *know* when she comes back with her hair a mess and bruises all over her neck two hours after going out for "seltzer" that she's probably doing a *bit* more than getting a drink—and it *probably* involves Kenzo and one of those guest rooms.

But she always comes back to me.

The two of us been holed up in here for days now. The outside world has gone quiet for me, and she's been my steady companion, not complaining once. But it can't go on like this.

I sit cross-legged on the bed, picking at the quilt, while Annika lounges next to me, half-watching a ridiculous Japanese game show. She slides her eyes toward me and nudges me with her elbow.

"You don't *have* to leave, you know."

I stares down at the comforter dully. "I can't stay here. I'm drowning, Anni."

She sighs, folding her arms under her head as she stares at the ceiling. "I get it, Frey. But, goddammit, it's gonna suck without you around."

I roll my eyes, snorting. "You used to be a lot better at bullshitting, you know."

She sighs. "I did, didn't I?"

I giggle and smile wryly, turning to her. "I'm gonna miss you," I mumble, my voice cracking. "But I need to clear my head. This whole thing with… *asshole*…" I grunt my new name for him. "I can't get past it."

The dossier I found on Mal's computer has been the subject of many long, late-night conversations between Annika and me.

"I still can't believe it," she mutters, shaking her head. "Whatever it was, it wasn't sanctioned by Kenzo."

"Oh, now, did you confirm that with him on your way back from the kitchen with snacks for us *before* or *after* he fucked you into the floor in the second-floor guest room?"

Annika's face turns bright red. "Hey, I *brought* the snacks…"

"As long as you two didn't *use* them."

She makes a face. "*Eww*?" She shivers and then shakes it off before she gives me a much more serious look. "I *did*, though. Confirm with Kenzo, that is. Whatever that shit was on Mal's computer, that is *nothing* Kenzo ordered or even knew about. The Mori-kai and the Nikolayev Bratva are allies now. No one on Kenzo's end of things has any interest in digging into whatever weird shit Mal was trying to pin onto Kir. Or *you*, for that matter."

"Not entirely *no one*," I mutter.

Annika looks away, shaking her head. "I just don't get it. I mean, I know Mal—"

"Asshole," I correct. "The name we've agreed to use going forward is *asshole*."

"Right. Sorry. But I *know* asshole," she sighs. "Not as well as you, obviously—"

"Lucky you."

She smiles wryly. "But well enough that this seems *really* off for him. It's not on brand at all. Neither is disappearing this long without a trace. A day? Yeah. Mayyybe even two, but that's pushing it. Three going on four days is weird for him. So is compiling crazy conspiracy theory dossiers on people he lov—"

She snaps her mouth shut.

“On…people. Allies and family and stuff.”

I frown, looking back up at the ceiling. “*Is* it, though? I mean, he’s always been secretive. And he’s got *demons* from his past, Annika. Big ones.”

“Well, duh, obviously. But no one knows the specifics. I don’t even think Kenzo does.”

I say nothing. She frowns and turns toward me.

“Wait, why does that silence sound like you do.”

I lift my shoulders. “They’re…pretty huge demons,” I say quietly.

Annika sits up. “He really told you about his past?”

I nod glumly.

“*Wow*.” Annika’s brows arch. “That’s…not something he does. At least, according to Kenzo.” She shakes her head. “That’s what makes this even weirder to me. He told you all of that, which he tells *nobody*, but then he’s also using you to get to Kir? It doesn’t check out. I’m genuinely confused by it.”

“Yeah, well, you and me both,” I mutter, pulling my knees to my chest. “But *it is what it is*,” I say bitterly. “I was just a way for Mal to get closer to Kir.”

Annika shakes her head. “I’m just still saying. This doesn’t add up.”

I let out a long sigh. “I don’t know what to believe anymore. But I know I can’t be here right now.”

Annika gives me a sad smile, reaching over to squeeze my hand. “I hate that you’re leaving, but I get it. You need to clear your head, and Kyoto’s not exactly the place for it.”

I sigh. “Nope. And, yeah, sorry about kicking your husband out.” I smile at her. “Thanks for letting me crash here and steal you and your bed from him.”

“Ride or die, bitch,” she winks at me. “You know you’re always welcome in my bed. I mean, metaphorically speaking.”

I laugh, rolling my eyes, and the knot in my chest loosens just a little. “I’ll miss this. Us.”

Annika shrugs, trying to be nonchalant, but I can see the emotion in her eyes. “You better call me every day, okay?”

“I will,” I promise.

I’VE SPENT a few days pushing aside the guilt of keeping Annika from Kenzo. But once it’s out there, it’s impossible not to think what a bummer it is that I’m continuing to do it. So I venture out to find them and announce that I’m spending the night in some *other* room in the house, and that Kenzo is welcome to bed his bride in his own room again.

Annika groans and hides her blushing face in her hands.

Kenzo fist-pumps the air and gives me a *really* huge hug.

I find Hana in her usual spot in the library, looking her usual ridiculously put-together self: silvery bleach-blonde hair *utterly* straight and perfect, her usual go-to monochrome, dark futuristic aesthetic *totally* on point.

She glances up when I walk in, and from the look on her face, I’m guess she knows all about what’s been going on. She neatly shuts her laptop and steeples her hands on the desk, tilting her head to the side as she studies me.

“You,” she finally says, “look like you need a drink.”

I grin. “*Desperately*.”

She smiles. “Let’s hit Kiyamachi Street.”

Kyoto isn’t exactly known for its wild and crazy nightlife. Osaka, just over an hour away, is where you’d go for that. But if you *do* want to stay in Kyoto for your night out, you can still have a great time. And Kiyamachi Street is the place to go.

“Which of your brother’s guards should we ask to drive us? They all dislike me equally, so, dealer’s choice.”

Hana snickers. “Kenzo’s guys don’t like *anyone*. Screw ’em. Besides, I have a way more fun idea.”

Hana’s “way more fun idea” turns out to be grabbing two of Takeshi’s bikes from the garage to get into town. Hana’s go-to ride is still a wreck from the crash that day Annika was taken. But Tak has a whole stable of barely or not-even street legal bikes for us to choose from, after promising him we won’t fuck them up.

I’m grabbing a helmet from the shelf on the wall of the garage when my phone dings and a new message pops up.

CAIN

Hey girl! Guess where I am?! Kyoto! Just got in for some work. We should meet up while I’m here!

I blink at my screen, grinning in surprise.

ME

That’s crazy! I’d love to meet up, but I’m leaving tomorrow!

CAIN

Oh no! That’s too bad. Could we do tonight? I’m working until late, but you did say you keep late hours. Let me know?

I grin. I know I won’t be out *that* late with Hana. She’s got work in the morning, and that girl keeps to her schedule like she’s a one-woman military operation. She goes to bed at a normal, regular time, gets her eight hours, and wakes up ready to grab the day by the balls.

Yeah, I have a *major* envy-crush on that chick.

ME

Totally! I’m headed out now to get a drink with a friend. But let me know when you’re done and we can hang out. Fair warning—I’m not great company right now.

CAIN

Oh no! What happened?

I hesitate. How much do I really want to share? Cain and I are close in an online sense, but Mal… That's a whole other story. Still, I could use someone to vent to.

ME

I was sort of seeing someone. It ended VERY badly.

CAIN

Oh Freya, that sucks. U okay?

ME

Not really, but I'll get there. I think I just need to get out of my own head.

CAIN

Well, I'm here for that! I'll text you when I'm done with the job and then I'll help you get out of that funk.

I smile at the screen.

ME

Sounds good. See you in a bit.

The cool evening air whips past us as Hana and I roar down the mountain roads into Kyoto. Hana takes me on a scenic route through much of the old city, which I know is her way of giving me a last little tour before I leave tomorrow.

We get to Kiyamachi Street and grab an outdoor table on the back patio at a really cool cocktail place called Samurai Mac's.

The drinks are elaborate and, okay, maybe a *little* pretentious. But they're also *strong*, and just one is enough to loosen the edges of my anxiety. It feels good to be out in the world, even if my insides are still tangled in knots.

We have one more round, then park the bikes and start walking through a lively part of town. Neon lights flash above us, and the streets are packed with people—locals, tourists. For a moment, it feels like I can breathe again.

Then I stop cold.

Hana keeps walking, oblivious to the fact that I've come to a dead stop, just staring at the wall of the building next to me. But it's not the wall, or the building, that I'm looking at.

It's the frayed, ripped, half-faded advertising poster that's showing through a myriad of *other* faded, ripped adverting posters pasted over it. Time, weather, and whatever else have faded and peeled back the top layer, revealing the older one beneath it.

My pulse skips as confusion tangles around me.

Because there, smiling at me in a white wedding dress, surrounded by a dozen Japanese men in tuxedos holding white lotus flowers…

Is *Cain*.

Not someone who looks like Cain. I mean it's *literally her*, smiling from the center of the advertising poster, surrounded by all those guys and text I can't read because it's in Japanese.

We've only met in person that once. But there's no mistaking it. The woman on the poster is *Cain*—same face, same hair, even the same quirky little smile.

What the actual fuck.

Hana laughs as she walks back to where I've paused and glances at the old poster. "Oh my *God*, that show was so fucking cringe."

I blink, frowning as I turn to her.

"Show?"

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah. It was called *Lotus Bride*. It was like Japan's super-weird version of *The Bachelorette*. All those guys are all totally rich and set for life. Except *one* of them is just a regular, broke guy. And *that* chick," she says, pointing to Cain, "has to pick one of them to marry. But obviously the whole twist is that she doesn't want to pick the poor guy." Hana rolls her eyes again. "Told you it was trashy."

I stare at the poster, trying to figure out what the hell this is.

“Oh, and the *best* part,” Hana snorts, “is that in the end it turned out that *none* of the guys was rich. They were *all* regular-ass men with regular-ass jobs...” She clears her throat. “Frey?”

I blink, pulling my gaze back to her.

“You okay?” she asks, noticing the look on my face. “You look freaked out.”

“Yeah, I just—” I trail off, unable to form a coherent sentence. My mind is racing, trying to piece this together. “*I know her*.”

Hana frowns. “Seriously?”

I nod. “Yeah. But not as…this,” I frown, pointing at the poster. “She’s an encryption analyst and network tester now. We met in New York.”

Hana arches a brow. “Really?”

“Yeah, I just know her as Cain.”

“*Cain*?” Hana types madly on her phone for a sec. “Okay, yeah, her name is Kitamura Kyo.” She glances back up at me. “The show ended weird because some fan figured out Kitamura was actually an actress. She’d done a few *super* low-budget horror movies before the show. And once that came out, everyone just started shitting on the show and calling it fake.” She snorts. “As if it wasn’t a totally scripted piece of crap to begin with.”

I chew on my lip, shaking my head. “This is really weird.”

“Totally. I can’t believe you know her.”

“I’m literally meeting with her later tonight.”

She whips around to stare at me. “Hold up, *what*??”

“Yeah! We chat all the time about coding and encryption hacking and shit. She’s based out of Tokyo, but she’s in Kyoto for work.”

“She’s a literal *hacker* now?” Hana’s brows knit. “That’s…sort of a strange pivot.”

“Oh, I agree. But she’s legit,” I shrug. “She really, *really* knows her shit, too.”

It suddenly hits me that *this* might one-hundred percent be why Cain has been so cagey about sharing her real name with me.

My phone dings.

CAIN

Hey! Just finished up! You still good to meet?

I glance at the screen, then back at the poster, then to Hana.

“That her?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

Hana grins. “Okay, tell me no if it’s a no. But…” Her grin turns devilish. “Could I *please* tag along and get just one picture with her?”

I snort. “Because of the show?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you hated it!”

“Oh, it was trash. But this one time, I walked in on Takeshi jerking off to her picture, and I have *never* let him forget it. I called him Lotus Husband for like a year. If I could get a selfie with her? I would *own* him.”

I burst out laughing. Hana’s love-hate relationship with her twin is amazing.

Also, this sounds hilarious.

“Okay, you can come,” I say hesitatingly. “But…I mean, she did switch careers entirely. She might not want to even talk about it.”

“Oh, for sure,” Hana assures me. “Nothing pushy. If it seems awkward to even bring up, I’ll bounce and let you hang with your friend. Promise.”

I grin as I text Cain back.

ME

Totally!

CAIN

Great! There's a super cool spot I've been dying to check out while I'm here. It's one of those speakeasy type places hidden in the back room of a random tea shop. Any interest?

ME

Hell yeah. I'm still with my friend, though. She can't stay long, but she was wondering if she could join us.

I groan.

ME

I'm sorry if this is super weird. But I just saw a poster randomly with your face on it, and she filled me in…

CAIN

OMGGGGG!! So embarrassing! LOL.

CAIN

You discovered my secret Batman identity, lol!

ME

Sorry! We can pretend I never did!

CAIN

Lol, it's ok. Was your friend a fan of the show?

ME

Her twin brother was. OK, maybe more of a fan of YOU. Seriously, if it's weird, just say no. It's not a big deal.

CAIN

No! Bring her too! I'll find a lotus for her brother, LOL

I giggle as I glance at Hana. "Okay, you've been approved."

She roars with laughter. "Oh my *God*, I cannot wait to rub it in Tak's face that I met his Lotus Bride."

We return to the parked bikes. Then, it's off to meet Cain.

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MAL

THE AIR FEELS DAMP, the sky overcast as I make my way through the narrow streets of the East End of London.

Everything about this city reeks of history, of power passed down through bloodlines and alliances. So it's the perfect place for someone like Adrian Cross to run his empire—a crime family steeped in old-world tradition that both respects its allies and crushes its rivals with the same quiet efficiency.

I stop in front of an unassuming old pub—the Ten Bells—which on most tourist maps is marked as the alleged location where Jack the Ripper found most of his victims.

Seriously.

What those maps *don't* mention is that it's also the seat of power for the Cross crime family—yes, even today, though it's an empire worth billions at this point. But, although I've never met him personally, I gather that Adrian is a man of traditions.

Whatever. That's not what I'm here for. I'm here for *answers*.

Adrian agreed to meet because of our mutual link: my uncle, Lars.

Back in the day, a group of them—it was more than just Uncle Lars and Adrian—called themselves the Kings and Villains. It was sort of a collegiate secret society, a bit like Yale's "Skull and Bones" or Cornell's "Quill and Dagger".

Lord’s College of London has—*had*, at least—the Kings and Villains.

My uncle used to tell me about them—vaguely, at least. How they all met and somehow became friends, despite coming from different walks of life. Some came from “good” moneyed families with connections and that sort of shit. Others, like Adrian, came from the grimy criminal streets without much more than they could steal. But all of them were destined to take over their own piece of the world.

Right now, I’m standing outside the Rome of Adrian’s Empire.

A large man in a black suit nods as I approach the pub, like he already knows who I am. He pats me down, though I’m not stupid enough to be carrying anything walking into this place. Then he gestures at the door behind him.

“Go on through, Mr. Ulstäd.”

That’s a “yes” on knowing who I am.

Inside the ancient pub, a bartender looks up and subtly nods his chin toward the back.

“Mr. Cross is upstairs, mate.”

I nod, heading past him to the door at the rear of the pub. Down a back hall, I find a staircase, and up that, I head down *another* dark hallway painted all black, until I get to a black door with gold filagree on it.

I roll my neck.

I’m here because the enormous amount of information that Oren sent me—which is what Freya saw the other day before she broke in front of me, almost *killing me*—proved to be almost *too much*.

Scratch that. It was definitely too much.

Too full of dark history and shadowy half-truths. Rumors that seem like they could be fact, and “facts” too absurd to be anything but hearsay.

Oren *is* the best at his job. But that job isn’t to filter shit. He grabbed literally everything there was to grab—hidden or otherwise—on Kir,

William, and my own family, and sent the whole steaming, towering pile of it my way.

Freya was the first victim when that pile crashed down. So that's why I'm here: to sort through the rubble and uncover *the truth*.

It's not even about me anymore. Or Kir, or William fucking Lindqvist. I don't give a shit about any of that now.

I'm here for *her*. Because I know Freya. And I know the pain and hurt I saw in her eyes the other day, when her spirit that I love so much broke right in front of me.

I need the truth because without it, I'll lose her forever. And that isn't an option.

I rap my knuckles on the black door with the gold filagree.

"Come in," a deep, English baritone rumbles.

I twist the knob and step into a sumptuous, dim, elegant office. A tall man with dark hair is standing by a fireplace, wearing an impeccable three-piece charcoal gray suit and holding a drink in his hand. He turns to let his stormy blue eyes lock with mine.

"Mal," Adrian murmurs quietly, shaking his head. He walks toward me as I shut the door behind me, shaking my hand with a firmness I can appreciate. "I knew one of these days our paths would cross. Please, have a seat. Drink?"

I shake my head and skip the pleasantries. "I need to know about Kir Nikolayev, William Lindqvist, and my family."

Adrian raises an eyebrow, his scotch halfway to his lips as he smirks. "Is that all?"

"Dealer's choice on the order in which I get that information, but yes. I need to know how my uncle knew them both, and how they knew each other."

"Straight to business, I see." He chuckles to himself, shaking his head. "So very like your uncle."

He nods to the deep forest green couch behind me. I take a seat on it as Adrian sits across from me in a kingly looking chair, leaning back and studying me for a moment before he speaks again.

“Lars was a good man, Mal. I respected him. He was one of my best friends.” He shakes his head, sighing. “What happened to your family was truly monstrous. I’m sorry.”

“He used to tell me stories about the Kings and Villains,” I growl. “I know it was a school social group, but was it also Mafia affiliated?”

Adrian smiles quietly, shaking his head. “No, m’lad. It really was just a ragtag collection of men from all walks of life and both sides of the coin. The linchpin was Thomas Ashford. Then there was me, Noel Ransom, Braddock McCreed, Kristoff Zima, Oliver Prince, Maddox Rook, and of course, your Uncle Lars.”

“Just a club,” I mutter skeptically.

I recognize most of the names he just spouted. Oliver Prince might have become more of a recluse in recent years, but the man was…probably still *is*…one of the wealthiest, most shrewd businessmen in the entire UK. So is Noel Ransom. Kristoff Zima rings a bell as the number two for the Tsavakov Bratva family. Braddock McCreed is a former *MP*, for fuck’s sake. And of course Adrian—head of one of the most powerful crime families in the world.

These are *seriously* heavy hitters. And they were drinking buddies together in fucking college?

Adrian shrugs. “Just a club, I promise you. Were we there for each other, of course, when we could be. But that’s it. No illuminati grand scheme of world domination.”

“Why call yourselves the Kings and Villains?”

“Because in each of us,” Adrian growls, “in all men, there is both king and villain. It’s up to the man to decide which he’ll be.”

“It’s *not* always up to the man,” I mutter through clenched teeth. “Sometimes the world chooses for you.”

“Then you choose again, for yourself,” Adrian fires back. “No one is stopping you. Your uncle would have agreed with me there. But you’re not really here to talk about my college drinking friends, are you?”

I take a measured breath and look at him carefully.

“How did my family run so afoul of William Lindqvist? My uncle did business with him, but only infrequently. When he did, though, it was fruitful to both.”

It’s one of the things I’ve never been able to wrap my head around. Lars and William weren’t *friends* or anything. But they did business together, and both profited from it. Until the day William’s men stormed onto our property and started shooting.

Adrian frowns as he glances away.

“Answer me,” I growl.

A small smile lifts his lips as he glances back at me. “You *really* are your uncle’s nephew.” He sighs. “It’s not that anything changed between William Lindqvist and *Lars*. It’s that things changed between William and *Kir*.”

Okay, this is making even less sense.

“What the hell would that have to do with my family?”

“Nothing,” Adrian grunts. “Yet everything. The problem was, after William discovered the affair, he also found out that Lars had been aware of it.”

“Affair?”

Adrian pauses, looking at me strangely. “I assumed you knew.”

Irritation rises up the back of my neck, tightening my molars as I level a look at him. “And why is that?”

“Well…because you were raised by your uncle…and of course your uncle knew, what with him being so close with Kir…”

I freeze, a ringing sound starting to whine in my ears.

“My uncle didn’t know Kir Nikolayev.”

Adrian shakes his head slowly. “I’m afraid you’re wrong there. They were friends. Close ones, in fact.”

“*What*?”

“They were introduced by Kristoff Zima, who was friendly with both of them. Kristoff, as I’m guessing you already know, given the expression on your face when I mentioned him before—”

Yeah, there’s a reason Adrian is an underworld king. He doesn’t miss *shit*. I’ll give him that.

“—is Misha Tsavakov’s number two. Has been for years, even worked for Misha’s bastard father before that. That’s how he and Kir know each other, through the Bratva world. And he knew *Lars* through the Kings and Villains.”

I try and process that one: Kir and my uncle were fucking *friends*.

How the fuck did I never know that?

My brows furrow. “Go back to what you said before, about the affair.”

Adrian’s mouth tightens, and a pained look crosses his face as he looks into the fireplace next to us and brings his glass to his lips.

“We don’t pick whom we fall for. Life would be much simpler and human history far less bloody if that were the case.”

“*Who had the affair,*” I growl.

“Kir,” Adrian growls quietly. “And Petra Lindqvist.”

The whining sound in my ears grows louder.

“*What*?”

“I don’t know the specifics, but I do know Kir and William had some business together, and I assume that’s how Kir met the…ah…forbidden fruit. It didn’t last long, as far as I know, but there was a child,” Adrian says sadly, shaking his head. “Your uncle knew about it, but kept quiet.”

My eyes blaze, my voice low and dangerous. “And then William found out.”

The look on Adrian’s face says it all. My heart wrenches, my gut twisting. The urge to smash the room to pieces is almost overwhelming.

“Is that why he killed my entire fucking family?” I hiss darkly.

Adrian nods his head slowly. “I’m afraid so, son. William wanted to mete out punishment on Lars for keeping the affair from him when he knew. But he also wanted to hurt Kir, for obvious reasons. He had Kir’s sister, Polina, and her husband, Daniil, killed. Though he seems to have missed their son, Kir’s nephew, Damian.”

My teeth grind as Adrian looks into the fire again.

“But that wasn’t enough for William. He was angry that Kir didn’t have a family of his own—a wife, children—for him to mete his revenge out on. So William picked the next best thing.”

Oh God…

“*Your* family,” Adrian says quietly. “He killed them to hurt Kir.”

Everything goes numb and cold. My mind is wrenched back through time, to that horrible, shivering moment when I climbed out of the pool wet, cold, and alone to find my home in flames and my family lying in pools of their blood.

Adrian exhales sharply. “William wanted to hurt Kir—deeply. Killing Kir would have been too easy. Killing your uncle Lars, and your entire family? *That* was a much better revenge. William knew that Kir and Lars were close. He wanted Kir to live with your family’s blood on his hands.”

I can’t breathe for a moment. My entire body goes cold, and the room around me warps as it all sinks in. The massacre that took everything from me—my family, my childhood—wasn’t an act of greed or power. It was personal. A twisted act of vengeance against Kir.

The cards start to fall into place. The intel Oren dug up about the hit William had out on Kir, and how after my family’s death, that hit just—

faded away.

It all makes terrible, monstrous sense now. William Lindqvist didn't want Kir dead anymore after that. He wanted him to *suffer,* remembering the blood of my family. Remembering Lars' body, hanged and burned. Remembering my mother and sister, raped, tortured, and murdered.

He destroyed my family to punish Kir.

I sit there in stunned silence, my mind swirling with rage and disbelief. All this time, I thought Kir might have been involved in the slaughter. But the truth is even worse. Indirectly, he was the reason behind it all. My family was murdered *because of him*.

I stand to leave, but Adrian's voice stops me cold.

"You didn't ask about the girl."

I pause, turning to face him. "Girl?"

Adrian's lips curl into a grim smile. "Petra's daughter from the affair."

My blood runs cold.

"Petra Lindqvist *had* the baby?" I whisper, dread clawing at my throat.

Adrian looks me dead in the eye, his words dropping like a bomb. "She did. And she raised her as if she were her and William's daughter. Kir never even knew she existed—Petra's choice, to keep the girl safe from her own husband."

Everything goes still. The entire world around me turns quiet and cold as the reality plunges into me like a vicious blade.

This can't be happening.

"You know I'm telling you the truth, lad," Adrian says quietly. "And I think you already know who she is."

It feels like I'm hurtling toward a black hole, being swallowed by nothingness and dropping into free-fall.

"They named her Freya."

The weight of the revelation crashes down on me, threatening to crush me. I can barely breathe, my mind reeling, trying to process what this means.

Trying to process that Freya is *Kir's fucking daughter*.

I don't quite remember what I say to Adrian by way of goodbye, just stumbling out of his office, my hands shaking, my heart pounding so hard it feels like it's going to explode from my chest. The street outside is loud, chaotic, but all I can hear is my heart pounding in my ears.

Freya. Kir. My family.

It all blurs together in a chaotic mix of blood, history, and loss.

Just then, my phone rings. I glance curiously at Annika's name on the screen before I answer.

"Annika—"

"Is she with you?" she snaps coldly.

I blink. "Excuse me?"

"Don't think I'm still not going to rip you in half for hurting her—"

"Annika—"

"But right now," she says coldly, "I need to know if she's with you… wherever the fuck you've skulked off to."

Something cold drags up my spine.

"Where's Freya, Annika," I growl quietly.

"That's what I'm asking you!"

The cold sensation becomes a blade, the edge sliding over my skin.

"You really, *really* hurt her, Mal," Annika spits through the phone. "And you and I are going to have *words* about it. Big ones. But right now, I need to know if she's with you, because she's not answering her phone. Neither is Hana."

The tip of the cold knife sinks into my flesh.

“What the fuck do you mean they’re not answering their phones?”

“They went out to Kiyamachi Street. Then Hana texted saying they were going to meet up with some hacker friend of Frey’s I’ve literally never heard of. Now they’re not answering their phones, and neither is Kir, and I’m *freaking out*—”

My phone vibrates with an incoming call. I glare at the screen when I see Jonas’ name flashing across it.

Yeah, *no*. That little Nazi shit is at the bottom of my “things to deal with right now” list. I have no idea why he’d be calling me outside of the anniversary of the day I killed Kasper, and I don’t fucking care.

“She’s not with me,” I growl. “I’m not even in Japan right now. And I—” I frown. “Did you say Kir isn’t answering his phone either?”

“No!”

My phone dings with a text. Annoyed, I yank it from my ear to glare at the screen.

JONAS

You’re going to want to take my next call, brother.

The whining sound in my ears from earlier ramps up to a howl. Without another word, I hang up on Annika as she’s yelling at me for being a bastard to Freya. The phone rings immediately, and sure enough, it’s Jonas again.

“If you’re looking to skip and dance down memory fucking lane,” I snarl, “believe me, Jonas, I am *not* fucking interested—”

Then I hear it. Not a barbed reply. Not a witty, poisonous comeback.

Just screaming.

My whole world goes dark, my blood turning to ice in my veins.

It’s *Freya*.

The world starts to collapse around me. “Freya!” I roar into the phone, my voice splintering with rage and panic.

A low, quiet chuckle rattles through the line, cold and mocking.

“Maleqqi…”

The voice purrs my full name, the name I stopped even responding to when Kasper twisted it to his own ends.

“*Jonas*—” I seethe. “Jonas, I’m going to—”

“I’m going to hurt her, Maleqqi. And you’re going to listen while I do it.”

The line goes dead.

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FREYA

I FEEL like I'm floating, my body untethered from reality.

I can't focus. Everything around me blurs and fades in and out of darkness.

It's cold, too—a biting cold that gnaws at my skin, though the pain in my head overshadows everything else.

Where the *fuck* am I?

The last thing I remember is walking into that speakeasy cocktail bar with Hana to meet Cain. Then there was just blackness—

Hana.

My heart lurches and I bolt upright, wincing as sharp, throbbing pain punches through my skull. My breath catches in my throat, and I instinctively press a hand to my temple.

"Hana…" I rasp, my voice cracking in my parched throat.

A soft whimper. Scuffling sounds nearby. I blink, forcing my vision to clear, and the blur around me slowly becomes slightly more defined—a stone floor beneath me, damp and rough against my palms. Stone walls, too. No windows. No light except for a single, dim bulb hanging over me, casting long, eerie shadows.

Panic twists in my gut as I turn, searching frantically for Hana. Then I see her.

“Hana!” I choke, scrambling to my knees and crawling toward her. She’s lying on the floor not far from me, curled up into a ball, her face pale, her breathing shallow. “Hana, wake up!”

My hand trembles as I touch her shoulder, gently shaking her. She stirs, groaning softly, her eyelids fluttering open. Her gaze is unfocused, and she looks how I feel. It’s *weird* to see her like this. She’s always so put-together, without a hair out of place. Now her makeup is smudged around her eyes, her hair tousled, and her clothes streaked with grime.

It’s unsettling.

“Freya…?” she mutters, sounding disoriented, her voice thick.

“Yeah, it’s me. Are you badly hurt?”

Hana squints, slowly getting herself up onto her elbows. “I feel like I got hit by a truck.”

“Same.” I try to smile, but it’s devoured by the dread crawling up my spine. “Do you remember what happened?”

Hana shakes her head slowly, her movements stiff. “We were at that place your friend told us about. And then…” She pauses, frowning, clearly trying to piece things together. “Then everything just went dark.”

Yeah—I remember that much, too. We’d walked into the “tea shop” front for the trendy bar, found the back room behind the shelves of cleaning supplies, opened the secret door to the bar itself. And then…nothing.

“I think someone drugged us,” I mutter, my voice tight with fury.

Hana groans again, pressing a hand to her head. “You think?”

“Yeah,” I mutter quietly. “Pretty sure.”

It happened to me once before, in the south of France. This was way before we found our footing and teamed up with Damian and Kir. Annika and I were thieving our way up the French Riviera, skimming watches and credit cards off drunk rich guys at clubs. I was feeling celebratory and ordered a glass of champagne. The next thing I knew, after three sips, the room was spinning.

Luckily, Annika was sober and got me out of there and back to our hotel, where I slept for almost an entire day afterward.

So yeah, I know what being roofied feels like.

Hana grimaces as she looks around. “Where the hell are we?”

I take a deep breath, looking around more carefully. The room is mid-sized, maybe twenty by twenty feet. But with no windows and barely any light, it feels suffocating. The walls are rough-hewn stone, cold and damp to the touch. Chains hang at the far end of the room, set into the stone like something out of a nightmare. The air smells stale, musty.

Old.

“It looks like some kind of basement or bunker,” I say, my voice hollow. “Or a bomb shelter, maybe.”

“Or a prison,” Hana mutters, her eyes scanning the room. She’s still pale, and I can see fear in her eyes even though she’s trying to hide it. I feel it too, crawling up my skin, making my chest tighten.

Then I hear it—a low, pained groan from somewhere in the far, dark corner.

I instinctively reach for Hana, pulling her closer. The shadow in the corner shifts, moving, and my breath hitches in my throat.

“Who the fuck is there?” I hiss.

For a long, agonizing moment, there’s nothing but silence.

Then, a voice—hoarse and broken—rattles out from the corner.

“Freya?”

I blink, stunned.

“*Freya? Is that you?*”

The figure in the corner stirs again, and finally, the dim light from the hanging bulb catches it enough to reveal the face. I gasp, scrambling to my feet, my mind spinning in disbelief.

It’s fucking *Kir*.

“Oh my God!” I rush to his side, dropping to my knees next to him.

Jesus.

He looks *terrible*—pale and bruised and weak, so unlike his usual powerful, lethal self. I glance down at his body, my eyes widening when I see his torn shirt and blood staining his side.

“Freya—” Hana is right next to me, yanking off her cardigan and tucking it gently under Kir’s head.

“What the fuck happened?!” I blurt. “How are you even here?!”

Kir groans, trying to sit up, but then winces, clutching his side where the blood has seeped through.

“Last thing I remember…” His voice is strained. “My SUV was hit. Isaak…” His jaw grits. “Isaak was shot. Then they took me and everything started to go black.”

I stare at him, horror washing over me. “*Who* took you?”

He winces, his breathing labored. “*Krvi i Novca*,” he grunts. “Blood and Money. Serbian mercenary outfit. At least, I think that’s who it was. Pretty sure I recognized the unit tattoo on a few of them.” His eyes darken. “And they might be the only motherfuckers crazy enough to accept a job that involves taking *me*.” He grimaces as he looks up at me. “They’re hardcore. Whoever hired them has solid connections, and deep pockets.”

My mind spins, trying to process it all. How the fuck is this happening? Who would want to take Kir, Hana, and me? My chest tightens as I take another look at Kir, my heart thudding in my ears.

“You’re hurt,” I whisper to him, my hand trembling as I touch the bloodstain on his shirt. “You need medical help.”

Kir shakes his head weakly, his expression stoic. “I’ll live.”

I look between him and Hana, the weight of our situation settling over me. We’re trapped in some basement or bunker, with no idea who took us, or

why. Does anyone even know we're missing? Have we been gone long enough for them to realize—

I frown as I glance back at Kir. "Wait. You were in New York?"

He nods, then his brow furrows as he gets where I'm going. "*Fuck*," he growls, glancing at Hana and me. "And you were in Kyoto."

Hana nods, peering closer at his side. "Your wound is bad," she mutters. "But the blood has stopped flowing freely. So you were injured some time ago."

I glance at her. "Long enough for someone to get *him* to us, or *us* to him…"

"…Or all of us somewhere else," Hana finishes glumly.

She's right. When I was drugged that time in France, I was out for literally twenty-four hours. We could be *anywhere* on the fucking planet right now. But I squash down the horrible feeling that idea brings up inside me.

"Okay," I say, my voice trembling but resolute. "We're going to figure this out. We'll get out of here."

But just as the words leave my mouth, the crackle of a loudspeaker fills the room and I jolt, my heart slamming in my chest.

"We're going to play a *game*."

The voice makes my blood turn cold. It's cruel, malicious, with a thick Scandinavian accent. It echoes through the small space, reverberating off the stone walls like something out of a nightmare.

Hana whirls, her hand shooting out to grab my wrist tightly.

"But there's a game *within* the game," the voice continues, its tone almost mocking. "Freya, I see your great concern for Kir. You care for him, don't you?"

My fear twists into fury. "He needs help!" I yell into the gloom. "He's hurt! You can't just—"

"I can do whatever I want," the voice says dismissively. "I am in control now. Not you. He's fine for now."

My jaw sets as I glare into the darkness. “People will be missing us!” I scream defiantly. “They’ll come looking for us! And when they get here, you’re fucking *dead*.”

The voice is silent for a moment before it laughs darkly, the sound ominous. “Oh, I know, Freya *Lindqvist*.”

I stiffen, a nauseated, cold feeling ripping into me.

“*What the fuck did he say?*” Kir grunts from behind us, his voice weak.

“I *know* someone will come for you,” the voice chuckles. “I’m counting on it. In fact, I even know *who* it will be.”

A shiver runs down my spine.

“The man who loves you, Freya.”

The words send a tremor through me, and even though everything about this moment is a pure horror show, I can’t stop the spark that flickers in my chest.

The man who loves me.

Mal.

It hurts to think about him, after everything that happened. But when I hear those words, it hits me all at once, and I realize *why* it hurt so much. Why it broke me so badly when I saw that betrayal all over his laptop screen.

Because I love him, too.

I pull in a shaky breath, trying to stay strong. “If you think Mal’s going to come and indulge you in your little fucking *games*, you’re delusional,” I fire back fiercely, even though my hands are trembling.

The voice sighs in response, sounding almost bored. “Oh, he’ll play. But before he does, Freya, you have a chance to help him.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Hana snaps sharply, though I can hear the fear beneath her anger.

The voice chuckles again, that same cold, mocking sound. “When Mal arrives, he will face a choice: save the woman he loves or save his family.“

The words hit like a punch to the gut, forcing the air from my lungs. Hana and I glance at each other at the same time, a horrified feeling ripping up my spine as our eyes lock.

The voice continues, unrelenting. “Mal will have to choose between saving *you*, Freya, or Hana.”

Hana grabs my arm, her face pale.

“You’re fucking *sick*,” I hiss into the darkness. “You think the people who care about us are going to let you do this? You think *I* am?”

The voice shifts tone, growing darker. “As I said, you can help him, Freya. There is a way by which both you *and* Hana can be freed.”

I glare into the shadows of the room, my chest heaving. “How?” I snap.

The voice’s next words drop like boulders, heavy and crushing. “By killing your father.”

The room falls silent.

I freeze, my mind going blank.

“Kill your father,” the voice repeats, “and you and Hana both go free.”

The air feels thick, suffocating. My heart pounds so loudly in my ears that it drowns out everything else.

“My father is dead, you fucking idiot,” I snarl. “He died years ago.”

The voice laughs, cruel and mocking. “Oh, I’m afraid not, Freya. He is very much alive.”

“Freya…”

I turn to Kir when I hear his voice. His tone is still faint and fragile sounding, but he’s no longer looking at me in pain.

He’s looking at me with a look of…*disbelief* on his face.

Confusion.

Guilt.

“That surname,” he says quietly. “What… What did he just call you?”

I shake my head. “Kir, you need to rest—”

“Well?” The voice mocks.

I grit my teeth as I turn away from Kir again. “I just fucking told you!” I roar. “My father is fucking *dead*!”

“That’s simply not true, Freya—not yet, anyway.”

“I’m not playing your fucking games, you stupid—”

“In fact, he’s sitting right next to you.”

A hundred different emotions roar though my head. Anger at the situation and the lies. Humor at the absurdity of it.

Sadness that it’s not true.

But as the storm of emotions whips through me, there’s a certain numbness that sticks.

A clawed little something, hanging on until the storm passes.

The silence in the room is *deafening*.

I turn quickly to look at Kir.

His eyes meet mine, filled with something I’ve never seen before. Not denial. Not laughter at the silliness of the claim.

Just hollow, stunned, realization.

Oh my God…

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MAL

EXHAUSTION WEIGHS me down like iron chains as I push through the sterile halls of Mount Sinai Hospital. My mind is splintered into a thousand different fragments, trying to cling to sanity in the face of the thousand questions crashing through my brain.

I'm here at Mt. Sinai because I, being in London, was closer to New York than anyone from our organization in Kyoto. There's nothing I'd like more than to be aiding Kenzo, Tak and a small army of Mori-kai men as they tear that city apart looking for any clues to where that fucking psychopath might have taken Hana and Freya, but given that I'm positive the attack on Kir was *also* Jonas' work, I'm here because Isaak, against all odds, survived that attack.

The man might not talk much, but he's got eyes and ears. He might remember something that could lead us to wherever Jonas has them all.

Two big Russian motherfuckers stop me outside Isaak's room. Again, the guy doesn't talk much, so it's easy to forget he's not Kir's bodyguard or anything, he's actually the number two for the entire Nikolayev fucking Bratva.

I bite back my impatience as the guards give me a thorough pat down. I need to talk to Isaak. I need answers, now, because we are *running out of fucking time*.

All I can hear echoing in my head is the sound of her screaming over the phone before Jonas ended the call. All I've been able to think about for the

last eight goddamn hours is the fact that he has her.

That he's hurting her.

The fact that these two fucks think I have the *slightest interest* in bringing a weapon into Isaak's hospital room is infuriating.

But finally they give a nod, open the door, and usher me inside.

Every eye in the room swivels suspiciously to me. On the one hand, I don't blame them. I'm the odd man out here. The *one* person not part of the Nikolayev brotherhood, and their top boss just got kidnapped in broad daylight.

But I ignore their stares, heading straight for Isaak, who's expecting me.

The guy is a fucking *mess*—bandaged up and connected to countless machines that beep and whirr. He took four bullets in the attack, and the SUV he was in with Kir got hit by a goddamn dump truck and rolled six times.

He's pale, his face lined with pain and badly cut from the broken glass. But there's still a fierceness in his eyes that speaks to his unwavering loyalty for his boss.

"*Mal*," Isaak rasps, his voice rough but steady. He nods at the other men. "*Ostav'te nas*."

I get a few more glares from everyone else. But then they nod solemnly, turn and file out of the room, leaving me alone with him in the sterile, quiet room.

Isaak turns his head slightly, wincing at the movement. "I've been waiting for you," he says, grimacing.

"You look like hell," I mutter, taking a seat next to his bed. "Your men on the phone said you were refusing to be sedated?"

He grunts. "I wanted to speak with you personally. Right now, I don't actually know who I can or can't trust within our ranks. It's possible this was an inside job."

I frown. “If it helps ease your mind, I doubt it. I think the man who took Freya and my cousin also took Kir.”

Isaak nods thoughtfully, wincing again.

I lean forward eagerly, my thoughts racing. “Tell me what happened.”

Isaak takes a deep breath, his face hardening. “It was a setup. We were driving down the West Side Highway, then a dump truck—out of nowhere—plowed right into us. The driver and the man riding shotgun were killed instantly. The two SUV’s behind us with our men formed a perimeter. But there were about a dozen fuckers who came swarming out of the back of the dump truck—masks, tactical gear. Real pros,” he grunts venomously. “I was defending Kir from inside the car, but…”

He grits his teeth and his eyes turn bitter.

“But *you got shot four fucking times*. Maybe cut yourself some slack,” I mutter.

“No.” Isaak shakes his head. “No slack. No excuses. My sole purpose is to protect Kir. I failed.”

I don’t have time to soothe Russian guilt right now.

“Anything you remember about what happened? Before you faded out?”

He nods. “*Da*. They were definitely professionals. I caught a few of their tattoos. Pretty sure they were *Krvi i Novca.*”

Fuck.

“The Serbian mercenary outfit?”

Isaak nods again. “*Da*. Good, well trained. *Very* expensive.” He bites back obvious pain as his eyes swivel to me. “This man who took Freya and your cousin… Who is he?”

My blood turns to acid.

Someone I should have killed years ago, right after I’d run Kasper through with that hay fork after he’d killed Filip.

I should have known. I should have known that the evil in him even as a boy would only grow, and fester, and spread like poison.

“Just someone from my past with an ax to grind,” I mutter, my voice edged and cold.

“He’s wealthy? Well-connected?”

I shake my head. “I don’t know. Not that I was aware of.”

“He is if he hired *Krvi i Novca*,” Isaak grunts dourly. He shakes his head. “*Fuck*. Kir *and* Freya…taken.” His face darkens, pain flickering in his eyes as he raises them to me. “He isn’t just my boss, and she isn’t just my charge to protect, or a co-worker,” Isaak grunts. “They are both like family to me. They *are* my family, along with Annika, even now that she’s married to your cousin.”

Part of me had thought to confront Isaak tonight and ask him if Kir knew Freya was his daughter. But it’s pretty obvious that Isaak himself isn’t aware of that connection, and I don’t have time to play family tree with him.

“Isaak—”

We’re interrupted by a nurse walking in. She takes a few readings from Issak’s machines, and then smiles at him.

“You’re ready now?”

“*Da*, thank you.”

I watch her inject something into his IV.

“What the fuck is that?” I growl.

She glances at me curiously. “Are you family?”

“No.”

She doesn’t answer, just turns back to finish administering whatever it is she’s giving to him. She tosses the syringe, makes a few more notes, pats Isaak’s hand, shoots me a not-so-hidden dirty look, and then heads back out.

I frown as I turn back to him. “Isaak, what the fuck did she just give you?”

“I am like you, you know,” Isaak murmurs. “I was alone in the world, without family. But then I met Kir. And through him, my brothers and sisters in the Nikolayev. Damian. Annika. Freya…”

Swearing under my breath, I stoop down and reach into the trash, pulling out the little vial the nurse chucked.

Fuck.

It’s fucking morphine. My gaze rips back to Isaak, and it’s only then that I realize he’s been holding the little switch in his hands to call the nurse for pain management.

Isaak is one tough son of a bitch, but it would seem he finally needs that edge taken off. Which means I’m out of time to get any details of the attack out of him.

“Issak, if you can remember *anything* else—”

“I am sorry, Mal, there’s nothing,” he grunts in his thick Russian accent. His eyes drift to mine. “Found family is important. Mine saved me. I don’t know you, but I think maybe yours saved *you*.” His blinking slows. “Before, I didn’t trust you with Freya. But I do now. You care for her.”

My voice cracks. “I do. Very fucking much so.”

“*Da,* good. Then find her. Find our found families…”

His eyes start to flicker closed. His words slur as the morphine takes hold.

“Family does not need to be blood,” Isaak murmurs. “Family is where you call home.”

It hits me just as he fades out.

Family is where you call home.

I’m out of my seat and bolting for the door in an instant.

I think I know where that psychopath took her.

THE AIR IS cold and heavy as I step out of the SUV into the stillness of the Norwegian night.

I've been awake for thirty-two hours. I'm exhausted, disheveled, and I need a fucking shower.

Darkness and an eerie fog swallow the landscape around me. The wind howls through the trees, echoes of a place I swore I'd never return to.

The farm on the edge of a black lake, surrounded by black woods.

My grandfather's prison camp, the birthplace of almost every nightmare I've carried with me since the day I killed the bastard and fled into those very woods.

The land is empty and desolate, the farmhouse and barn rising out of the ghostly moonlight like a broken monument to everything I've tried so hard to bury. I take a deep breath, the sharp, bitterly cold air cutting into my lungs.

It's been twenty years since I last set foot here. Twenty years since I watched Filip die, snapped, and turned on Kasper.

But I know Jonas. I know how his twisted mind works. If he's holding Freya and Hana anywhere, possibly Kir too, it's here.

It has to be.

I check the house first. It's dark and half gone to nature, with the roof caved in on one side, and what looks like the remains of a squatters' camp in what was once the kitchen. The stairs to the second floor are mostly gone, but it's clear there's nothing up there but bird shit and demons.

The basement brings a fresh wave of nausea as I stand in the middle of the empty space, staring at notches I remember all too well on one of the crumbling support beams.

A hook on the wall where a wooden paddle once hung, carved with the swastika and eagle, so it would leave the imprints of hate on your skin.

My blood staining the floor—faded, but still there, after all these fucking years.

But that's all I find in that forsaken basement: blood, dust, and the ghosts of my past.

No Freya. No Hana. No Kir.

Outside, I push open the barn door, the creak of the wood echoing in the dead silence. My footsteps are loud on the dirt floor as I slip through the shadows, my heart pounding in my chest.

More memories hit me like blows—Kasper's brutal "lessons"…Filip's innocent eyes filled with terror…and Jonas, always watching, his face twisted in a mixture of admiration, fear, and *excitement* as Kasper spouted his sick, hateful dogma.

I stare at the spot where Filip died, where Kasper broke him beyond repair. I can still hear his screams, still see the way his body crumpled under Kasper's whip—and then, minutes later, the way Jonas looked at me when I ran that hay fork through Kasper.

I walk through the barn, my heart sinking lower with every step.

They're not here.

I'm furious at myself for thinking it would be this easy. That Jonas would be stupid enough to bring them *here* of all places, when it's *me* who's looking for them.

Hopelessness settles in my chest, thick and suffocating, as I realize I have *no fucking idea* where else in the entire world Jonas could be hiding them.

The image of Freya, trapped and screaming, gnaws at my insides. The thought of her at Jonas' mercy, of what he might do to her, rips through me like a blade.

I've never felt this kind of fear before. Not even as a kid, when my grandfather's cruelty threatened to break me.

This… This is different. It's paralyzing.

And for the first time in years, I feel utterly lost.

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MAL

I'VE BARELY SLEPT in the last three days.

I *can't*. Not with Freya and Hana still missing.

I'm back in Kyoto, my eyes bleary as I stare at the computer monitor, checking and rechecking the footage from hundreds of CCTV cameras on the night Freya and Hana were taken. I've at least managed to narrow down the search little: they had drinks at a cocktail bar on Kiyamachi Street, and the credit card receipt gives me a time and place to start from. But even so, it's like looking for a needle in a digital fucking haystack.

I'm looking for *anything*—any flicker of movement, any sign of them. My hands shake as I scrub through the footage, my eyes burning from the strain.

This is getting you nowhere, I think darkly.

Freya is the one who would excel at this, and yet she's the one who's missing.

The irony isn't lost on me.

I thought for sure they'd be at the farm. But that was a dead end. We tried tracing Jonas' phone to see if we can get a geographic location based off the last ping of his cell connection. But he's either turned it off or destroyed it after his last call to me, so it's impossible to trace.

The door creaks open. Annika steps in, her face pale, dark circles under her eyes. She's as wrecked as I am. She hasn't slept much either.

Kenzo's just as bad. Though he's working through his worry by combing all of Kyoto like a maniac. Word is out all over the city that the Mori-kai is on the fucking warpath, so it's not like he's encountering any resistance.

But we still can't find them. Three fucking days later and we *can't. Fucking. Find. Them.*

"Mal," Annika says softly, coming up beside me. "You need to rest."

I don't answer, just keep scrolling through the footage, one frame at a time. Every second that ticks by is another second wasted, another second Freya's in danger.

"Mal, seriously. You can't keep going like this."

"I have to," I snap, not bothering to hide the bite in my voice. "I have to find them."

Shit. Regret slams into me when I glance back and see the hurt in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," I mumble. "I just... I have to keep looking."

Annika smiles wanly. "You're not going to be any good to Freya if you're dead on your feet," she whispers. "Please. Let someone else take a look while you rest."

I hang my head. "Maybe."

The door opens again and Takeshi storms in, carrying a couple mugs of coffee. His usual mask of cocky smugness has been *gone* the last few days, revealing the monster underneath: prowling, snarling, full of madness and a thirst for blood.

Tak hands each of us a cup of coffee.

"Thanks," I mutter, taking a sip. I can feel Annika's eyes on me, watching, waiting for me to snap again.

The tense silence stretches between us as we all focus on the footage. I scroll through frame after frame, the monotony of it starting to blend

together. I turn back to Takeshi.

“Anything from Kenzo?”

He shakes his head. “No. Just—”

The sharp gasp from Annika has me whirling back to the monitor so fast that the coffee sloshes over the edge of the cup. Takeshi’s already leaning over my shoulder, staring at the screen.

“Oh my God!” Annika blurts. “That’s *them*!”

I hit pause, and there they are—Freya and Hana, walking down the street the night they disappeared.

“Where is this from?” I bark, my pulse racing.

Takeshi squints at the screen. “Looks like a storefront security camera for a small shop just off Kiyamachi Street.”

I stare at the footage, my mind racing. Freya is paused mid-step, looking at something. Hana is walking ahead of her but then turns back, joining her as they both stare at…

“What are they doing?” I growl.

Annika’s brow furrows. “They’re looking at some poster. What the hell’s it for?”

“*The Lotus Bride*.”

The two of us glance back at Takeshi in confusion.

“What?” Annika asks.

“*The Lotus Bride*,” Takeshi reiterates. “It was a lame reality show, kind of like *The Bachelorette*, but it tanked when someone figured out the main chick was an actress.”

“Huh?”

“Kitamura Kyo,” Takeshi says with a shrug. “The woman in the poster. She was the chick picking the dude, but it turned out she was a professional

actress.”

Annika arches an eyebrow. “How the hell do you know all that?”

Takeshi mumbles something about having weird taste in TV. My eyes are glued to the footage. Freya and Hana are pointing at the poster, talking to each other, but there’s no audio.

“We need someone who can read lips,” I say, my voice a low growl. “Now.”

AN HOUR LATER, Professor Ken Eiji from the Kyoto School for the Deaf, a local expert in lip-reading, sits nervously across from us as he stares at the screen.

It’s pretty clear the quiet, middle-aged man hasn’t ever been in a room with a member of the Yakuza, let alone at the house of the *head* of the most powerful Yakuza family in Kyoto. He’s rattled, and he looks like he’s sure someone’s about to chop his hands off or something.

I don’t have time to care about his nerves. I just need the skills in his head. We’ve offered him a *lot* of money to be here, and I need him to work fast. My patience is hanging but a fucking thread, and it’s wearing thin.

“All right,” the professor says, glancing nervously around the room before refocusing on the footage. “One more time, please.”

I replay the clip and he studies the movement of their mouths. His brow furrows in concentration, eyes narrowing as he leans closer to the screen.

After what feels like an eternity, he speaks. “Hana is telling Freya about the reality show in the poster. She’s describing the basic concept.”

I frown. “And Freya?”

The professor nods for me to replay the footage, watching Freya carefully. “She’s saying she knows this woman. The one on the poster.”

My frown deepens. “Freya knows a reality TV star?”

The professor nods. “Yes. Freya says her name is Cain, and she’s...an encryption analyst and network tester now, it seems. They met in New York.”

My blood runs cold.

Who the fuck is Cain?

The professor pauses, clearly unnerved by the atmosphere in the room. “Does that…help?”

Annika steps closer, her face pale. “Hana texted me about meeting Cain that night, before they were taken.” She exchanges a worried glance with me.

I grit my teeth. The puzzle’s still too fragmented. Too disjointed.

Takeshi frowns. “What are the odds that a washed-up D-list actress is a cybersecurity expert just a couple years later?”

“Fucking low,” I growl, my mind racing.

Annika looks at Professor Eiji. “Thank you so much for your help, Professor. I’ll have someone drive you home.”

He nods quickly, clearly eager to get out of the room. As soon as he’s gone I stand up, the weight of everything pressing down on me.

“She’s not a hacker,” I mutter.

“How do you know that?” Annika asks.

“I don’t. But I’m going to figure it out.”

THE DOOR to the modest apartment in Wakayama creaks open, and a young, pretty woman looks up at me shyly.

I’ve done my homework on the drive down here. Kitamura Kyo *is* still an actress, it appears. She’s done a few regional TV commercials for a cat food

brand, and she's the spokeswoman for a plastic surgery clinic in Wakayama. But that's it.

I already have an idea how she's connected to Jonas, but I need to hear it from her.

"Good evening. Kitamura Kyo, is that correct?" I ask, my voice low and steady. I don't want to scare her too badly, because she might be my only link to that fuck and finding Freya and Hana.

She blinks, seemingly surprised at my Japanese. Most people are when a *gaijin* like me, with my blue eyes and tall stature, can speak fluently.

She nods quickly. "Y-yes. That's me."

"I need to speak with you about a job."

She smiles. "Oh? Okay, I can get you the number for my agent—"

"You don't *have* an agent," I growl quietly. "The one listed on your website has a number that can easily be traced to this address. Which is how I found you."

The poor woman pales, fear creeping into her eyes, visibly nervous as hell. "Okay. But I don't do so much acting anymore. I'm mostly writing these days. I'm working on a play, actually—"

"I'm not interested in your play," I interrupt, my voice sharp. "I'm interested in your role as Cain."

The blood drains from her face.

"You were hired to pretend to be a hacker called Cain. You were in New York, where you met a young woman around your age—"

She nods. "Freya. Yes, I remember."

My head tips to the side slightly. "What *specifically* were you hired to do?"

She stares at me, frozen. Then, slowly, she nods. "A man reached out. He said he'd loved me on *Lotus Bride* and wanted to hire me for this immersive mystery thing for a friend of his."

I frown. “Immersive mystery?”

“Yes, like *The Game*, that movie with Michael Douglas. He said his friend Freya was going to have to solve all these real-world clues to figure out the mystery.” She smiles. “It sounded fun.”

“And you kept in contact with Freya? I mean after you met her in New York?”

Her brows knit as she shakes her head. “No, not at all. It was just the one-off role I played.”

When she sees the black look on my face, her smile dies.

“Is…something the matter?”

“Who’s the man who hired you,” I growl, my patience fading.

Kitamura’s brows knit. “I’m sorry, but what is this? What’s going on?”

Fuck it.

“The man who hired you is a murderous psychopath who used you to trick Freya and my cousin, and then kidnap them both.”

Kitamura’s face falls, horror washing over her. “That’s *awful!*” Then the second shoe drops as her own involuntary part in what’s happened hits her. “Oh my *God*…” she chokes, holding a hand to her chest. “Oh my *God*, and I—I helped him—”

“You didn’t know,” I say coldly. “But right now, Kitamura, what I need is *any* connection to this man you may still have. Anything that might lead me to him.”

Her eyes dart back and forth, her face pale as she hugs herself. “I—I don’t know if I do. I only met him twice—once when he hired me, then once when he paid me, in cash.”

“Did he pay for your trip to New York?”

She nods. “Yes, but he just fronted me the money. I bought the tickets myself.”

I swear in English under my breath as I look away.

“Oh! I do have his number, if that helps?” she says nervously. “We talked details of the job on the phone a few times.”

I glance back at her. “That, Kitamura, would be *very* much appreciated.”

Five minutes later, after thanking her again and reassuring her that the Yakuza—she could tell from my arms—has no interest in her, I’m back outside, calling Oren.

He picks up after one ring.

“I need one more thing from you,” I mutter.

“Anything,” he growls. He’s heard by now what’s happened to Freya, Hana, and Kir.

“I need to find out if a number is still in use. If so, I need it traced to its last known location.”

It’s a long shot, but the number he used to communicate with Kitamura is different from the one he’s historically used to call me.

I’m just hoping to hell that he’s still got that phone on him.

“Done. What’s the number?”

I rattle it off to Oren. There’s a pause on the other end, then his voice comes through, slightly disbelieving. “Holy shit, it’s still active. I’m tracking it now.”

My pulse skips.

Another pause. “Norway.”

No…

“Looks like…a farm of some kind.”

My heart wrenches.

“Yep, got it. It’s a farm on Jordahl Lake. I’ll send you coordinates now.”

My entire body goes rigid and cold.

I missed them.

I was fucking *right there*, and I missed them.

All I can think about is Freya screaming.

“Thank you, Oren,” I manage to grind out before I hang up, my face a mask of death.

I missed them at that godforsaken fucking place the first time. This time, I’m going to tear the place apart brick by brick.

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FREYA

"GOOD MORNING."

I flinch, shuddering as the staticky voice crackles over the loudspeaker, cutting through the silence like a blade.

I swallow the rasping dryness in my throat, blinking awake to the same dull, dim light that's been on since we got here. Nearby, Hana's eyes open, her blonde hair limp, her face waxy, the purplish circles under her eyes growing.

"*Hana—*"

"I'm fine," she mumbles curtly, forcing a weak smile.

But she's not. None of us are.

I get up and walk over to check on Kir. *Oh God…*

He's not doing well. At all. His face already looks like he's halfway into the grave, and he can barely lift his head off the ground anymore. I've lost track of how long we've been in here. Three days? Four? *Five*?

Long enough that if Kir stays here much longer, he's going to die.

That's not "letting negativity in" or "giving up hope". That's reality. Hana and I have done what we can for the wound on his side, but he's lost a ton of blood, it's *definitely* infected, and we don't have anything to clean it with. The small amount of water that gets slid once a day through the little

slat at the bottom of the door to this room, along with some grimy looking food, is basically putrid.

I glance back over to Hana, slumped against the wall, looking…gray. Was it the water? The food? The stale air in here? Whatever it is, she's not well. Her eyes have had a listless look since yesterday, and the perspiration on her forehead tells me the fever hasn't gone down either.

I try and push my anxiety down as I turn back to Kir. I peel the shirt away from his wound, my nose wrinkling at the smell.

He *needs* a doctor. Like, yesterday. So does Hana.

After I adjust Kir to make him comfortable, I head to the bucket in the far, dim corner of the room. After I pee, I shuffle back over to Hana to check on her. She weakly waves me off.

"I'm fine, Frey."

I grit my teeth. She gives me a look that says "I know you don't believe me, but please leave it."

So I do. For now.

"Let's try this again, shall we?"

We both flinch at the tinny voice from the speaker in the ceiling. It's the same grating tone I've heard every morning for the past however many days we've been in here, always followed by the same demand, the same twisted promise. But today… Something's different. The words feel heavier. Colder. Darker. As if even the disembodied voice has grown tired of its sick game.

I shiver on the stone floor, the cold seeping into my bones. My gaze shifts to Kir, slumped against the damp wall. He's barely conscious, his breathing shallow and uneven. His skin gleams with a sickly sheen, the infection spreading faster than I anticipated. Every cough, every ragged breath feels like it's chipping away at what little time we have left with him.

Hana frowns beside me. She's tried to stay strong, but I can see it in her eyes—the fear, the helplessness. Every day the voice asks me to do the

unthinkable. Every day, I refuse.

I glance at Kir again, my heart twisting in my chest. This man gave me a second chance at life. A purpose beyond just stealing to survive. I've admired him, respected him, and loved him for years.

And he might be my father.

It feels insane to trust a single thing coming out of the loudspeaker above our heads. But it's something I can't let go of. I look over to Kir, and wonder *what if.*

What if the disembodied voice is telling the truth? What if the man I've looked to for guidance and considered family all these years is *actually* my blood?

It shouldn't change anything, but—it does. There's a shift inside me, a difference in how I see him, how I see myself.

Did he know? Has he always known?

I want to scream the question at him, but he's too weak. Too far gone. His body is shutting down.

The urge to scream rises up in my chest, but I choke it down. I can't show weakness. Not now, not to the monster that has us.

"I'm not doing it," I rasp, my voice raw and broken. "I'm not killing him."

The loudspeaker hisses back silence for a long, heavy moment. I wonder if the voice will even answer at all. Maybe they've finally given up, maybe they'll just—

The creak of metal grinds through the room as the small tray slides through the slot under the door. It's the same every time: a half-rotted piece of bread, and a cup of water that looks like it was dredged from a fetid puddle. The sheer minimum to keep us alive.

Barely.

"We'll try again tomorrow," the voice says, smooth and unbothered. "We have all the time in the world."

Dear God. The way the voice says it—the confidence, the patience.

It’s unnerving.

It tells me that whoever is behind that voice truly believes no one’s coming for us: that we’re completely alone here, tucked away in whatever hell they’ve created, where no one will ever find us.

I look at Hana. Her eyes are glassy, but there’s still an edge of determination in them. She hasn’t given up yet. Not completely. But I know she’s just as scared as I am. We both know what the voice means by “all the time in the world.”

No one’s coming.

The room is quiet except for Kir’s labored breathing and the occasional drip of water from somewhere in the walls. Hana and I don’t need to speak to understand what’s happening. Each day that passes, each day we deny the voice’s demand, we grow weaker. Kir grows weaker. Eventually, we won’t be able to refuse anymore. Or Kir will just die anyway.

Panic starts to creep in. But I force myself to stay calm. I can’t give in to the fear. Can’t let it take over.

Because deep down, in that part of me that still clings to hope, I know Mal is out there. I can feel it.

He’s coming.

He has to be.

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MAL

FUCK. The farmhouse looks just as deserted as it did when I came here before.

Night still clings to the air, wrapping the place in a thick, heavy fog that presses against my skin, though I can just start to see the first glint of morning light creeping over the horizon.

I'm crouched low in the brush, my eyes locked on the crumbling structure. It's been abandoned for years, left to rot like a festering wound on this desolate farm, but Jonas is here.

I can feel it.

My fists clench as I wait. The farmhouse door creaks open, and my breath stills.

It's him.

He was just a boy like me that night twenty years ago when he screamed at me over and over on this very spot.

You killed him. You killed our father. You bastard, you killed him.

I remember shaking Jonas as he knelt next to Kasper's lifeless body, cradling my grandfather's head in his lap. I told to him to come with me, to leave this place and the nightmares behind and start a new chapter.

He refused. He looked up at me and told me he'd make me pay.

Tonight, he’s finally making good on that threat.

He’s moving casually as he steps into the faint light, almost lazily, like this place holds no power over him. Like the ruins of our shared, broken past is his kingdom now.

He walks toward a car parked by the edge of the property. He climbs in and drives off until the low growl of the engine fades into the distance. He’s heading toward the nearby town of Møsvinger.

I suspected as much on the flight here this second time. That’s why the place looked abandoned the last time I was here—he’s keeping Hana, Freya, and Kir hidden somewhere on the property while he stays in town.

The thought sends a rush of adrenaline through me. *They’re here*.

My phone buzzes. I don’t answer it, in case Jonas has hidden security measures in place. But after I deny Kenzo’s call, I text him back.

ME

I’m here. Jonas just left.

KENZO

WAIT for us, Mal. We just landed. We can be there in forty-five minutes.

My teeth grind. I’m glad Kenzo is here along with Tak, Damian, and a forty-strong combined force of Mori-kai and Nikolayev men. But I don’t have forty-five minutes.

Freya, Hana, and Kir might not, either.

I text Kenzo back the complete lie that I’ll wait for him, so he doesn’t freak out or try calling me or anything. Then I turn off my phone.

I spring from the brush, my boots silent on the damp earth as I rush across the yard. I reach the house and push the door open, the stench of decay assaulting my nostrils.

My muscles tense involuntarily as I step inside, scanning every inch of the dark, crumbling interior. The memories of Kasper’s cruelty and the pain we endured in this place slam into my psyche all at once.

“Freya!” I call, my voice echoing through the empty space.

No response.

I move faster now, tearing through the rooms, desperate for any sign of them. I missed it when I was here before, I refuse to miss it again.

There’s nothing on the main floor. Just remnants of old furniture, and the ghosts of our tortured childhoods. The second floor is barely able to hold my weight, but there’s nothing there anyway. I head toward the basement, my chest tightening as I descend the creaky wooden steps.

This is where Kasper used to keep us. Beat us. Torture us. The horrors of the past gnaw at my insides, but I push through them, focusing on the present.

I search every corner, every crevice. They *have* to be here somewhere. I just have to find—

I freeze when I see it. An odd piece of flooring in the far corner, strangely clean in the grimy, dust-covered space.

My gut twists.

I use the crowbar leaning against the wall to pry up the floorboard, and there it is: a metal door that opens to a metal staircase leading down into the darkness below.

My pulse thuds as I descend, the narrow spiral staircase winding down into the blackness. The air grows colder and damper when I get to the concrete floor at the bottom. With the dim light coming in from above, I can just make out a long stretch of hallway delving ahead into the gloom.

So that’s where I go, moving cautiously, all my senses on high alert. The walls are stone, perhaps some kind of ancient bunker. Every sound echoes off them in the stillness—my breathing, the dull thud of my boots, the distant drip of water.

I’m getting close. I can feel it.

Then I hear a sound behind me. At first, it’s just small, metallic, grating. But then the whole hallway booms as the door I propped open at the top of the

stairs slams shut.

The hallway is plunged into complete darkness.

My spine snaps rigid and I freeze at the sound of footsteps, clanging on the metal staircase.

And then…laughter.

"*Maleqqi*," a voice growls, low and familiar. So very Norwegian-sounding. "It's good to be back here with you."

My blood runs cold.

Jonas.

"This is where we were made *men*, Mal," Jonas' voice whispers in the darkness. "This is where everything *started*."

The light is completely gone now, swallowed whole by the gloom. I reach for my phone to turn it back on, but I can feel him near. So I turn, fists raised, ready for the fight I know is coming.

Pain explodes through my temple as his fist slams out of the pitch black and into my face. I go reeling, seeing stars as I tumble back and crash into the stone wall behind me.

I grunt, shaking it off and righting myself, fists up again, even though I can't see a goddamn thing.

Shit.

I groan again when I get hit a second time, this time from behind. Pain explodes down my neck and back as his fist slams into me. I whirl, throwing a wild punch, but it only connects with air.

I wince, catching myself against the wall as his leg sweeps mine, smashing hard into the side of my knee. He lands another punch right on my jaw, and I groan when the taste of copper explodes across my tongue.

What the *fuck*. I can't see *anything*. Meanwhile, he's scoring direct hits every time. The fucker's gotta be wearing some kind of night vision goggles.

“Come on, Mal,” Jonas taunts. “Don’t tell me you’ve gone soft.”

I throw another wild punch into the darkness, but it’s useless. He strikes again, a brutal hit that connects with my ribs, knocking the wind from my lungs. I stumble, struggling to find my footing.

He’s relentless. He hits me again.

I grit my teeth, forcing myself to keep going, even as the pain and punishment intensifies.

“You know what’s going to happen, Mal?” Jonas’ voice slithers through the darkness. “You’re going to stay alive just long enough to watch her die. But not before I make *her* a monster, same as us. She’s going to kill Kir, Mal,” Jonas laughs. “*I’m going to make her kill her own father*.”

I stop cold, his words sinking in like poison.

“And then she’ll be destroyed, Mal. She’ll never recover from it.”

Rage burns within me, white-hot and blinding. I lunge forward, but he’s already danced away. I hear him behind me again, his steps light and deliberate. I’m losing this. I’m losing *her*.

Then I see it—a thin crack of light cutting through the blackness, just ahead. A door, maybe.

I wait, listening, sensing his position. He strikes again, but this time I’m ready. I grab him by the arm, using the momentum of his punch to throw him off balance. It gives me just enough time.

I rush toward the door, my hand fumbling frantically for the knob, my fingers curling around an old-fashioned crank lock. Jonas is right behind me, his footsteps pounding on the stone floor. I twist the lock, yanking the door open.

Instantly, light floods the hallway.

It’s not bright, by any means. But Jonas screams just the same, clutching his face as the ultra-sensitive goggles I was right about him wearing magnify that light to the brightness of a fucking supernova and send it right into his optic nerves.

He roars in pain, stumbling back, disoriented, and I seize the moment. I charge him, hitting him hard and tackling him onto the floor of the room I've just unlocked.

Jonas recovers faster than I expected. He rips off the goggles and slams into me with brutal force.

I feel the blade before I see it, a sharp sting of steel as it pierces my side. I roar in pain, but I don't let go. We're locked together in a vicious struggle, his hand twisting the knife deeper.

"Mal!!"

Her voice cuts through the chaos. I look up, stunned. Through the haze of pain, I see them.

Hana. Kir.

Freya.

Our eyes lock, pure fire exploding between us. My hurt lurches, and the burning need to take her into my arms is almost overwhelming.

But then Jonas twists the knife again, sending a fresh wave of agony through my body. He yanks it out, only to viciously stab it right back into my ribs. I roar in pain, my vision blurring and my strength flooding out of me along with my blood.

"Mal!"

Hana's voice grabs my attention. I blink through the pain, only now seeing just how grim it looks down here. The walls, the lone light. The filthy floor.

Kir, who genuinely looks dead lying on the ground.

Hana's face is pale and hollow when our eyes lock. But she grits her teeth, forcing a braveness into her eyes as she and Freya wrench themselves off the floor and bolt toward me.

"*No*."

My pulse jangles and Freya and Hana skid to a stop when Jonas yanks a gun out of the back of his pants. He levels it at the two of them, grinning

monstrously and shaking his head.

“That’s not how we play this game,” he growls darkly. “*Back*.”

Freya stands tall, glaring pure hate at Jonas before her eyes dart to mine and soften. Hana looks like she’s about to fall over, but she also holds her ground, right next to Freya.

“*Sit. DOWN*,” Jonas barks coldly. “Or I’ll let him bleed out right here.”

He twists the knife still embedded in my ribs. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of visibly reacting. Just the same, my teeth grind, pain coursing through my body as I fight the urge to scream.

Freya half lurches toward me before I stop her.

“*No*,” I croak, shaking my head as Jonas levels the gun at her. “No, Freya…”

“Listen to him, girl,” Jonas spits venomously. He grabs me by the arm, dragging me back toward the door as I roar in overwhelming pain.

Out of nowhere, a shape launches into Jonas. Hana lets out a yell as she smashes an elbow into his nose, catching him off guard. He drops my hand, snarling as he tries to fend her off. But Hana’s been practicing jiu-jitsu since she was six.

She’s a whirlwind as she catches Jonas in the chest and stomach, then drops him to one knee with a leg sweep. Her hand slams into his face, knocking him sideways as he spits a torrent of blood.

“*Mal*!”

I wince as Freya suddenly grabs me up off the floor and yanks me to her, sobbing. “Let’s—”

The gunshot thunders so loud it feels like it’s coming from inside my head. I spin just in time to see stone fragments falling from the ceiling as Hana stumbles back, her face pale, her hands over her ears.

In one motion, a furious-looking Jonas winds up and cracks the butt of the gun across her face. Freya screams as my cousin goes toppling sideways,

the light in her eyes flickering on and off as she drops to the ground.

“The next bullet goes through your fucking skull.”

The room goes still. Desperate fury roars through me as I look over to where Hana is slumped on the floor, barely moving.

“Back up,” Jonas hisses at Freya.

She doesn’t move.

“BACK. UP.”

It’s only when he aims the gun at me that she drops my arms. Tears bead in her eyes as she pulls away from me, her face going even paler.

“*Don’t you dare fucking hurt him*,” she chokes.

Jonas just chuckles as he grabs my arm again and yanks, making me groan as a fresh surge of pain floods over me.

“No promises,” he snickers, dragging me by the arm after him out the door.

“We’re going to go play a game, Mal,” Jonas snarls, his voice dripping with malice. “We’ll see how long you last.”

My head twists, and I lock eyes with Freya for one second.

Then the door slams shut behind us, sealing me away from the people I came to save. The darkness closes in once again, and all I can hear is Jonas’ twisted laughter.

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FREYA

THERE'S a split second as Jonas is dragging Mal through the door that I freeze.

There's too much to worry about.

Hana, lying stunned and bleeding on the ground. Kir, who looks barely an hour away from death.

Mal, being dragged to God-knows-where by that psychopath.

But before I can wrench myself out of my frozen state, a shape suddenly goes tumbling and crashing past me.

Oh God.

Kir lurches across the floor, launching himself forward onto the ground and reaching out. At the last second, just as the door is about to click and lock shut, Kir's fingers curl desperately into the doorframe.

"Kir!" I scream, rushing toward him.

His grip on the door falters for a moment before he catches it, wedging his hand into the crack. He grunts as the door slams on his fingers. But it doesn't close.

He's deathly pale, his skin translucent and waxy, sweat streaming from his brow. But he holds the door open, even though his strength—and his consciousness—is fading fast.

“*Go*,” he croaks, barely focusing on me as he slumps to the ground.

I quickly grab a small chunk of concrete off the ground, wedging it into the door before I gently release his fingers. I ease Kir onto his back, tears in my eyes as I take his hands and kneel next to him.

“Freya…go—”

“I’m not fucking leaving you here,” I spit, my heart wrenching as I glance down at his side. *God*, it looks terrible. And there’s fresh brownish red blood seeping into his filthy shirt.

“Freya, you need to…” He wheezes. “*You need to go help Mal*.”

My heart breaks. I hesitate, torn between the need to help Kir and the panic rising inside me about Mal. Kir’s eyes find mine, locking onto me with a fierce intensity, even though pain is etched into every line of his face.

The look he gives me says everything we haven’t had time to say in the last few days. In this moment, all the doubt and disbelief when the voice on the loudspeaker told me Kir is my father crashes down as we look at each other.

None of that matters. All I see is Kir, the man who’s been my father in every way that counts. The man who saved me from an aimless life and gave me a new purpose.

“When we get out of here…” Kir growls quietly, his voice barely above a whisper, “and we *will*…you and I, Freya, will have a long conversation about a lot of things,” he croaks.

I nod, tears blurring my vision. “Kir—”

“But for now, *get Mal*,” he rasps, his voice cracking. “*Go*.”

I glance at Hana, crumpled on the floor, her body limp but her chest rising softly. Kir sees the fear in my eyes and nods.

“I’ll make sure she’s okay,” he barely whispers. “Now *go*.”

My legs obey before I can think, carrying me stumbling out of the room and through a dark hallway until I come to a staircase leading up into *another* basement. Mal’s roar of pain echoes through the walls from somewhere

above, a sound so anguished it sends shivers down my spine. My breath comes in ragged gasps, my heart racing as I push on.

At the top of the stairs, I burst through a door into an utterly dilapidated, crumbling old farmhouse.

And everything goes to hell.

The light hits me all at once, blinding after the suffocating darkness of the basement.

Burning me.

I flinch, gasping as I stagger back into the dimness of the staircase.

It's daytime.

Sunlight streams in through the cracked windows and the holes in the ceiling and walls. Pure survival instinct sinks its claws into me, and I shrink back from the light, my body shuddering.

Then I hear it.

A roar of pain.

My heart wrenches as I venture to the top of the stairs again. I crane my neck, peering out through the half burned-out kitchen and the shattered side door and across an overgrown farmyard.

Holy fucking shit.

Jonas is dragging a heavily bloodied Mal across the dirt toward the open maw of a leaning, rickety old barn.

I choke back a sob, my heart twisting as I watch the monster yank the man I love into the shadows. Through the huge open barn door, I watch, sobbing, as Jonas ties Mal's wrists together. He yanks an old rope down from a pulley up in the rafters, slipping the metal hook at the end of it through the bonds at Mal's wrists.

I stifle a cry when Jonas yanks hard on the other end of the rope, hoisting Mal up into the air, his body dangling from the hook, his feet barely scraping against the ground.

Mal’s blood drips onto the dirt floor, his body limp, his face twisted in agony. Jonas moves with chilling calmness, a cruel smile forming on his lips as he grabs a whip from the wall and cracks it through the air.

“NO!!!” I scream, my throat raw and cracked, my body past the point of exhaustion. Tears flow hotly down my cheeks as I sink my nails into the old doorframe of the basement stairs, watching the horror unfold across the sunlit yard.

The whip slashes across Mal’s back with a sickening crack. His body jerks, and I scream again, choking on the sound.

Another crack.

And another.

My heart breaks.

I can’t do this. I can’t watch him die like this.

I won’t.

Jonas turns, his eyes gleaming with demented delight as he reaches for a rusty hay fork hanging on the wall, and my blood runs cold.

No.

It all comes rushing back to me: the story Mal told me about the night when Kasper beat Filip to death. The night Mal snapped, running his own grandfather through with a hay fork.

I realize I’m not just watching abject cruelty.

I’m watching *revenge*.

Jonas was the favorite: the one who idolized Mal’s grandfather and looked up to him in every way. The one who felt nothing but betrayal when Mal killed the cold-hearted monster.

This is Jonas’ revenge, his twisted re-enactment of that night.

There’s no time to think. My eyes dart around the kitchen until I spot an old knife lying in the sink. It’s dull and rusty, but it’s all I’ve got.

My hand wraps tight around the handle. I pause at the side door, shrinking into the shadows next to it, already feeling the light raking its nails over my skin.

But there's no time to worry about me or make a better plan. It's this, or the man I love dies.

Put that way, it's an easy choice.

Just the same, it's like being set on fire.

The burning sensation tears through my skin the instant I step outside, blistering, scorching. The heat is overwhelming. The smell of my own flesh searing fills my nostrils like poison, but I keep running.

I can't stop. Not now.

I burst into the barn, the knife heavy in my hand, my vision swimming with agony and every inch of my body feeling almost literally on fire. Jonas whirls, his eyes widening with surprise as I slam into him, driving the knife deep into his stomach with every ounce of strength I have left.

He roars in pain, doubling over. He grabs my arm, sending explosions of agony ripping through me at the mere touch of his hand on my seared, burned skin.

"*You little bitch*!!"

The handle of the hay fork in his other hand crashes into my right temple and I collapse to the ground, my mind reeling, darkness creeping in at the edges of my vision as it swims in and out of focus.

I try to move. But my body doesn't respond. The world tilts as Jonas towers over me, his face twisted into a mask of sadistic glee.

"Ahh yes, *the sunlight*," he snarls, his lips curled into a malevolent grin. "You really are a fucking vampire."

Darkness is closing in fast, and the pain is unbearable. The burns on my skin throb, the taste of blood coppery on my tongue. Jonas crouches beside me, and I scream when he drags a finger over the blisters on my arm.

“I was going to end this quickly,” he murmurs low in my ear, “but I’ve changed my mind.”

Jonas grabs me by the arm, ripping another ragged scream from my raw throat. Without warning, he yanks me out of the shade of the barn and back into the relentless sunlight.

Fire consumes me.

Pain destroys me.

But it’s knowing that this is the end and I don’t get to spend it with Mal that truly kills me.

“*No…*” I whimper, trying to curl into a ball around myself, my skin blistering worse as the sun claws into me. “*Please…*”

“I’ll enjoy watching you burn,” Jonas says thoughtfully, his voice laced with venom.

The sun rips through my flesh, my body convulsing with pain. My vision darkens completely, until I can’t tell if it’s the sun or the darkness swallowing me whole. The heat is intolerable, and I’m seconds from giving up when I hear it.

A twig snapping underfoot.

A growl.

A *roar*.

And then Jonas is ripped away from me and flung back like a rag doll.

I’m barely conscious as Mal scoops me into his arms, cradling my limp, burned body gently against his chest as he staggers deep into the blessed shade of the barn.

“I’ve got you,” he whispers, his voice breaking. “I’ve got you…”

He wrenches one of the horse stall doors open and sits me down behind it, as if trying to shield me further.

He turns again, blood pouring down from his ribs as he charges back outside. Jonas is just staggering to his feet as Mal's bloodied frame slams into him with a primal fury.

"Mal! Stop!"

Jonas' eyes go wide as Mal rips the hay fork away from him.

"Mal! We're brothers!" he shrieks, blood and spit dripping from his mouth. "We're *family*!"

Mal's cold, brutal laugh shreds the air.

"No, Jonas. We're not."

The sickening sound of steel points plunging wetly through Jonas' throat into the dirt, followed by Jonas' gurgling scream, has me wrenching my face away and squeezing my eyes shut.

I flinch as a shadow falls over me. The light is still streaming in through the barn door, inching closer and closer as the sun rises higher in the sky.

"*I'm here*," Mal croaks as he drops to his knees in front of me. I can barely move without pure agony ripping open every single nerve in my body. But I still manage to throw myself against him.

It doesn't matter if it hurts when his arms encircle me.

I don't care.

Because if this is the end, he's who I want to hold onto.

Mal eases us down, covering my body with his. He winces as he rips his shirt off, covering more of me with it.

I look up at him, tears streaming down my face. "*I love you*," I choke out.

"*I love you too*," he rasps quietly. Then his eyes roll back and wet stickiness flows from the stabs in his side, coating me.

My vision fades. My body screams in pain, but then a smile twists my lips.

Not a bad way to die.

One last moment in the morning sunlight.

In his arms.

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FREYA

THE WORLD FEELS like it's slipping away, fading in and out like a half-remembered dream.

My skin screams. Every breath is shallow. It feels like the surface of my body is being grated off me, one layer at a time.

But none of that matters when my eyes slowly open.

Mal…

He's lying on top of me, covering me.

But he's completely still, his body limp and cold.

I try to shift under him, but my limbs don't cooperate. Everything feels distant, like my body is a million miles away.

Somewhere in the distance, I hear car doors slamming. I hear someone scream my name, coming from the other side of the world.

"*Mal…*" I whisper. It's barely a sound. My throat is too dry, too raw, and my voice doesn't carry; it feels like a ghost is speaking what I want to say. "*Mal… Wake up. They're here…our friends… They're coming for us…*"

I wait for him to stir, to respond. But he doesn't. He's terrifyingly still and pale. His face is inches from mine, and I can't even feel his breath on my cheek.

Jesus, his blood is *everywhere*.

My heart tightens as I see just how much of it there is. It coats my skin, sticky and cold, and my chest heaves as panic rises in me.

"*Mal…*" My voice cracks weakly. "*Please… Wake up. I love you… Wake up…*"

He doesn't move. He doesn't answer.

Everything spins, and I feel like I'm slipping under again, drowning in agony and fear. Tears sting my eyes, blurring my vision as I lie there, helpless beneath him.

"*Freya!*"

The sound of my name, loud, sharp and desperate, cuts through the fog. My pulse races. I try to answer, but my voice is too weak to do anything but croak.

"Freya! Where are you?!"

Footsteps, fast and pounding, grow louder. I hear more voices—urgent, frantic.

"FREYA!"

It's Annika. I'd know her voice anywhere. I try to call back, to tell her where I am, but I can't. Everything is heavy, so very numb.

"*FREYA*!!!"

Someone is rushing toward me and falling onto their knees in the dirt next to me. My eyes flutter open, and I'm looking up into Annika's scared, sobbing face.

Then I see the rest of them rush in behind her—Kenzo, Takeshi, Damian, and more. They all look terrified, their faces ashen as their eyes land on me. Kenzo is barking orders at someone. I want to scream for them to help Mal first, but my lips can barely move.

"Oh my God!" Annika chokes, her hand trembling as she reaches out. "Freya, can you hear me? We're here, we're going to get you out."

"*Help…him…*" My voice is a weak, rasping plea. "*Help…him…*"

Annika's eyes widen, panic flashing across her face. She looks up at Takeshi and Kenzo, her voice cracking. "We need medics, now!"

"*Kir…Hana…*" I manage to croak, my lips barely forming the words. "*Basement…*"

Everything fades away. I hear voices, feel hands lifting Mal from me. I start to cry, wanting him near me. *Needing* him near me. They're taking me away from him, and I don't want to go. I reach for him, my arm weakly outstretched, but it's no use.

"*Help him… please…*" I choke, tears stinging my eyes.

The voices around me blur together, fading into the background as the world drifts away. I try to hold on, but I'm slipping, falling into the darkness.

Then I go under.

"FREYA…"

When I wake, the first thing I notice is the steady beeping of machines, the rhythm soothing in its consistency. The next thing I notice is the smell—clean, antiseptic. I'm in a hospital. The sheets are soft, the air is cool.

But what really pulls me out of the hole is that I no longer feel searing pain on every inch of my skin.

I blink, my vision slowly clearing, and turn my head. Annika is sitting beside my bed, her eyes tired but warm.

"Hey…" she says softly, grinning. "You're awake."

My heart tightens. "Mal—"

"Is okay," she cuts me off gently, her smile widening just a bit. "He lost a *lot* of blood, but he's out of surgery. He's going to be okay."

The relief that slams into me has my entire face crumpling, tears slipping down my cheeks. Anni starts to cry as well as she reaches for me, taking my bandaged hand in hers.

“Kir and Hana are okay, too,” Annika continues, her voice soft. “Kir came…*close*,” she says through a choked throat. “Like, really, *really* close. He was septic when he came in. So he’s going to be here a while, but he’s through the worst of it. They’re both going to be okay, Frey.”

My chest heaves with a mix of emotions. Relief, exhaustion, the lingering ache of everything that’s happened. I turn my head slightly, taking in the sterile white walls of the room.

“We’re in London,” Annika explains. “Kenzo had everyone airlifted from that farm in Norway. You’re in one of the best hospitals here.”

I nod weakly, too tired to say much.

“How long was I out?”

“Three days.”

I’d bolt upright, but it would hurt too much. Instead, I wince, glancing down at myself.

Fuck, that’s a lot of bandages.

“It looks worse than it is,” Annika says softly. “That’s what your chief physician told me, at least. Mostly second-degree burns, but a few were third degree. Those were bad.” Her mouth twists. “You’ll have some scars, Frey.”

“I dunno,” I wince, grinning wryly. “They say chicks dig scars. Think Mal will, too?”

She snorts and smiles widely. “I know he will.”

Annika looks at me for a long moment, her expression shifting. “Hana told me…you know,” she says quietly.

I swallow hard. I know exactly what she means. I spent hours down in that basement wondering how I’d talk to Annika about the Kir thing if I ever

saw her again.

“I don’t even know if it’s true,” I mumble.

Annika raises an eyebrow and smiles. “Well, if it is… That’s one hell of an upgrade.”

I grin, but before I can respond, the door creaks open. I turn my head, my heart skipping a beat when I see Mal shove it the rest of the way open and stagger inside, leaning on a crutch.

He’s pale, his face drawn, but he’s walking—if barely.

Annika leaps to her feet. “Are you fucking serious?!” she blurts, rushing to him, “Mal! You’re supposed to be in bed! You’re supposed to be *unconscious*, actually!”

“Yeah, not happening,” he growls, his eyes locked on me as he pushes past Anni.

When he reaches my bedside, I can’t hold back the tears. He grabs me gently, pulling me into his arms, careful not to hurt me, but I can feel the fierce desperation in his touch.

“Hug me harder,” I blurt, my voice thick with emotion.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he murmurs as his lips brush over my hair.

“I don’t care if it hurts,” I sob, clinging to him as tightly as I can. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he whispers back hoarsely.

Annika stands in the doorway, watching us. “Um, maybe you *both* could take it easy?” she teases, her voice soft and affectionate.

I laugh through my tears, burying my face in Mal’s chest, feeling his warmth, his heartbeat steady against mine. His mouth finds mine, and I whimper, choking out a sob as our lips crush together.

“Yeah, you know, or *don’t*,” Annika mutters from behind us. “Not like you both just almost died or anything.”

I pull away from Mal just long enough to grin at her. She grins back.

“Right, well, guess that’s my cue.”

When she’s gone, I moan and slam my mouth back to Mal’s. He kisses me fiercely and desperately, possessively and entirely. Like he always does.

And always will.

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EPILOGUE

FREYA

I SIT across from Kir in his office in New York, nervously drumming my fingers on the arm of the chair. The room is filled with the hum of the city below, the neon lights gleaming through the tall windows. He's in his usual dark charcoal gray three-piece, I'm in my go-to of black jeans and a big black hoodie, Doc Martens, spiked choker, and…if it matters…an especially *gorgeous* new set of pastel peach demi-bra and thong from Honey Bridette that I treated myself to.

It's a surreal moment, both of us staring at the envelope sitting on the desk between us.

Some mysteries, we still don't have answers to. Like if the Grigorov Bratva had any ties to William Lindqvist, and if they may have helped in his murder of the Ulstäd family. That's the real reason Kir had me hacking into Orlov Financial Solutions that night that seems like a million years ago, now. It's also the same reason Mal was there that fateful night.

But other mysteries, we're about to solve right now, simply by opening this envelope.

Kir's looking a lot better now, two and a half weeks after what happened in Norway, but he's still a little pale. And he's walking with a cane, at least for the next month or so, which I know he hates because he says it makes him look old.

It doesn't. The guy is forty-four and could pass for early thirties, easily. If anything, the cane just makes him look distinguished—or like he's about to

break out in a vaudeville act, but something tells me he doesn't want to hear that. Ever.

"Whatever it says in that envelope," Kir says quietly. "William's crimes and evil deeds are not *yours*." His eyes harden as they lock with mine. "I need you to hear that, Freya. What he did to Mal's family, and to Damian's parents…" he shakes his head grimly. "Those are *his* sins. Not yours. No matter *what* is inside of this," he growls, tapping the envelope.

I nod, swallowing a lump.

"I was barely eighteen when I met your mother. Both of us were."

He's still looking at the envelope between us as he speaks.

"William and I had gotten into business together, though Mal's uncle Lars warned me against it. He was right, in the end," Kir adds with a touch of darkness in his tone before he shakes his head. "William was a prick. Though that's not why I…"

Had the affair with my mother.

Kir gazes at me, his blue eyes clashing with my own. "I think we were both looking for a way out. I had plenty going on in my life that I was running from, but knew I could never entirely escape. She was trapped in a marriage she'd never wanted, to a man who…well…was a fucking monster. We never meant for it to happen. But then…it did…and it was *good*," he sighs. "*We* were good. And, by the way, I always meant to take her from William. Permanently, I mean. I cared for her deeply, Freya."

I nod, swallowing before I glance back at the envelope that holds the truth. Kir follows my gaze and takes a deep breath.

"Whatever it says in this envelope," he says quietly. "It doesn't *have* to change anything between us."

"What do you think your odds are?"

He smirks, lifting a brow. "Odds?"

"Of, you know…being my dad."

I feel my face burn as I say it. It's weird. I've always thought of Kir as almost a father figure, or maybe a cool, fun uncle, but that envelope might make that more real than I ever imagined.

"I don't gamble, Freya. You know that."

"Take a wild guess."

"Freya—"

"Oh, just fucking open it already," I blurt. "Jesus."

He smiles a little. "What I mean is, if it says…*that.*.. It doesn't change anything. You don't *owe* me anything. You get that, right?"

I shrug. "Yeah. But…I mean…if I *wanted* it to change something…"

I lift my gaze to Kir. His lips twist.

"Why don't we just open it," he says quietly.

"Yeah," I swallow nervously. "I think that's best."

He picks the envelope up from his opulent desk together with a brass letter opener, slipping the blade under the edge and neatly slicing it open. He pulls out the folded paper inside, opening it, sliding his eyes over the text.

Kir stiffens a little. Then he folds the paper and sets it down. He lifts his eyes to lock with mine, but he says nothing.

"*Well*?!" I blurt, unable to keep it in any longer.

Kir sighs. There's a flicker of something unreadable in his gaze that makes my chest tighten.

"Well, on the plus side," he grunts, trying to brush off the weight of the moment, "the blood test—that, frankly, you should have had done *years* ago instead of taking William's word for it—says you don't have Huntington's disease."

I stare at him. My heart stutters.

I mean, that's great. Better than great—it's fucking incredible. I've spent my entire life thinking I had a death sentence hanging over me. And now, in a few words, Kir's erased that fear.

But that is *not* what I'm focusing on right now.

"Kir…" I prompt. My palms feel sweaty, and I'm almost afraid to hear the words.

"The downside is," he says, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest, "you might owe me a shitload of Father's Day cards."

The room goes still as we lock eyes.

Blue on blue.

"Holy *fuck*," I whisper, my throat tight.

Kir watches me for a moment, then nods slowly, his brow knitting. "*Yeah*."

We sit there, just staring at each other, the room filling with the gravity of what this really means. My heart is pounding, and I can't quite breathe. He's been this looming figure in my life—someone I've admired and respected for years. And now, knowing he's my biological father…

It's overwhelming.

It's insane.

It's…*awesome,* actually.

Suddenly, it hits both of us simultaneously, and we're out of our chairs, rushing at each other. I don't know who moved first. It doesn't matter. I throw my arms around him, and he pulls me close in the kind of hug I never thought I'd experience. It's fierce and protective and raw, with years of pent-up emotion crashing through both of us at once.

"*I'm so sorry*," Kir murmurs against my hair.

"For what?" I choke, tears burning my eyes.

"For not knowing. For not being there from the start," he says, his grip tightening.

I pull back, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. “You were there when it mattered,” I whisper. “When I needed saving, and a purpose, and a new future.”

We hold each other for another heartbeat or two, letting it all sink in, before the door slams open and Damian bursts into the room, his expression impatient.

“*Well*?!” he demands, glancing between the two of us like he’s been waiting his whole life for this moment.

I sigh, giving him an exaggerated look of sorrow. “Bad news, dickhead,” I say, shaking my head dramatically. “You’re related to me.”

Damian’s eyes go wide, then his face splits into a massive grin. “*No fucking way*!” he whoops, rushing over to me and grabbing me in a bear hug. He spins me around in a circle, laughing like an overgrown child.

“Damian!” I squeal, swatting at him as he sets me back on my feet, but I’m grinning like an idiot too.

“Well you’re fucking stuck with me now!” he teases, laughing and ruffling my hair in a way that’s *far* too brotherly for my taste, but right now I don’t care.

As I’m fixing my hair, the door swings open again and Mal strides in, his expression turning lethal when he sees Damian’s arm still slung around my shoulders. He glares, that ultra-possessive look flashing in his eyes. I roll mine in response.

“Relax,” I say with a smirk, patting Damian’s arm. “We’re related now. First cousins.”

“Yeah, psycho boyfriend,” Damian says with a smug look, “I’m family now, so you’ll just have to deal with it.”

Mal scowls as he crosses the room to me. “Doesn’t mean I have to *like* dealing with it,” he grumbles under his breath, slipping his hand into mine and pulling me possessively away from Damian and into him.

I look between the two of them, a strange warmth spreading through my chest. It's the most surreal family reunion I could ever imagine, but somehow, it's perfect.

"Well," Kir says, clearing his throat. "Now that we've established our new family dynamic, I vote we move on to the part where we don't nearly die on a daily basis."

"Says the *Pakhan* of Bratva criminal empire," I mutter.

Kir chuckles just as the door opens again. I grin when I look up and see Annika and Kenzo.

"Couldn't help but overhear. I second the not dying on a daily basis part," Annika calls from the doorway. "I think we've had enough of that shit for a lifetime."

Mal glances down at me, a faint smile tugging at his lips before his eyes darken with something more, something private. "You ready?" he asks quietly, his voice husky.

I nod, my heart fluttering. "Yeah. Let's go."

He pulls me close, pressing a kiss to my temple before he lets me go. I turn and hug Damian—much, I'm sure, to Mal's chagrin—even though I'll be seeing my cousin in a few weeks when he and Kir fly out to join Mal and I in Kyoto for business.

Kir—*Dad?*—and I hug for a long, long time.

"I've always been proud of you," he says quietly. "Now I just get to take a little credit for it."

I laugh, smiling up at him. "You're visiting soon…"

"Yeah," he says softly. "When I do, maybe we could..."

"Do daddy-daughter stuff?"

"Whatever the fuck *that* is," he grunts, smiling. "Yeah. I'm in."

Mal takes my hand again and guides me insistently toward the door. Annika gives me a knowing look as we pass her and Kenzo, and a soft blush rises to

my cheeks.

This life we're all building together is messy. It's complicated, and chaotic. But it's filled with people who matter. And honestly, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

As we step into the elevator to leave for the airport, to fly to Japan and the rest of our lives, I glance up at Mal. His jaw is set, his eyes focused. But there's a softness to him now that wasn't there before.

He catches me looking and smirks. "What?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Nothing," I whisper, leaning into him. "Just… I love you."

He pulls me closer. "And I love you too. Always."

And then his lips crash to mine, lifting me off my toes as the elevator doors slide closed, taking us into the future.

Together.

The Memento Mori series continues with Damian's story in *Emperor of Lust*.

Haven't gotten enough of Mal and Freya?
Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser:
https://BookHip.com/WGPCSRP

This isn't an epilogue or continuation to *Emperor of Rage*. But this extra hot "follow-up" story is guaranteed to keep the spice going.

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DEVIANT HEARTS

Thank you so much for reading *Emperor of Rage*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Jagger Cole universe continues with Damian's story in *Emperor of Lust*. You can also get a glimpse of some of the other characters mentioned in this series (the Drakos and Kildare families) in the Dark Hearts series, starting with *Deviant Hearts*, a dark enemies-to-lovers, forced marriage mafia romance. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you.

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.
www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Deviant Hearts*.

Chapter 1
Neve

Fuck. Me.

He’s doing it.

Again.

I tell myself not to look. I tell myself to keep my eyes on the book and the study notes in front of me, because NYU seriously *does not care* what my last name is, and they’ll have no issue failing my sorry ass from my government and public policy master’s program if I don’t focus.

I tell myself it’s high time I bought some fucking curtains, so I can avoid this…*distraction.*..since it’s clearly shaping up to be a frequent thing.

But the problem with telling yourself not to do something that deep down you *really* want to?

The “deep down” part always wins. *Always*.

Or, at least it does with me. Which might say more about me and my own self-control…or lack thereof.

No. It’s definitely easier to go ahead and blame my new neighbor across the street. Let’s go with that.

I mean, *he’s* the one that keeps walking around naked in a penthouse made out of fucking *glass*.

Mark Twain once said, “There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable.” But, smart as he was, it’s clear Mr. Twain never had the neighbor I do. If he had, I’m pretty sure he’d have taken a whole lot of the whimsical “charm” out of that statement.

And sure enough, despite my best—or, okay, let’s be real, *mediocre*—efforts, soon enough, my gaze shifts from the notes in front of me to the man across the steel canyon from me.

Sweet Jesus.

He’s a freaking *god*. Tall and lean, and as muscled as a superhero. Shoulders and arms built to take away your ability to speak. Chiseled abs and those grooved hip-muscle things that I don’t even know what they’re called but they seem to be evolution’s way of making even smart women go fucking stupid.

Tattoos for days. Deeply tanned, Mediterranean skin, with a shadow on his razor-sharp jaw, and dark, *perfectly* tousled hair.

It's like living next to a goddamn Avenger who models for Armani while he's not busy saving the world from Thanos. No wonder he seems to have a problem with wearing clothes.

Heat floods my cheeks as I glance across the chasm between us. The morning light streams right through his penthouse, which is another annoyance.

Two months ago, my place was a dream apartment. A modern, light-filled loft at the top of a thirty-eight-story building. So high up that I didn't even have neighbors who could see into this place.

Is it more than a little ostentatious? Well…*yeah*. It's a thousand square feet of modern glass and steel on the West Side overlooking the Hudson. Was it absurdly expensive? Also, yeah. But there's gotta be *some* perks that come with being a Kildare to offset the downsides.

Issues making friends my entire life because my family is the Irish Mafia? Check. Problems having any sort of romantic relationships, for the same reason? Check and double check.

Aimless, drifting, utterly unsure of what I want to do with my life, because what exactly *do* mafia princesses do all day?

Check and fucking mate.

For the last year, I've been throwing myself into this government and policy master's program at NYU. But after that? Who knows. For now, I'm at least finally living on my own.

But life still sort of feels just like something I'm drifting through.

Truth be told, I was pretty sure my uncle Cillian was going to shut down my plans of finally moving out of the main family house and into this place. Especially with all the violence and upheaval in the last few months as the fighting between the Irish Kildare and Greek Drakos families escalated to world-war-three levels.

But my dream apartment and the building itself are incredibly secure and easy to defend. Especially when there's a rotating crew of four Kildare guys constantly guarding the lobby—much, I'm sure, to the chagrin of the other tenants.

Yet that whole "dream apartment" thing quickly lost some of its luster when they completed construction on the building across the street, next to mine. The building with the double-height glass penthouse that rises two floors *above* my thirty-eighth-floor apartment, that now blocks part of my view of the river.

His glass penthouse.

The man with the god-like body and the aversion to clothing. The man with the sensual tattoos and the swarthy, lean look of a Trojan warrior.

The man I have absolutely *no* business gawking at and thinking these sort of sinful thoughts about. Not just because it makes me a spying creep. But because he's a man I should have every reason in the world to hate.

He's not just my neighbor.

He's the *enemy*.

But try telling that to my under-satisfied libido and clenched thighs.

At last he moves from where he's been standing at the windows staring out at the Hudson with a cup of coffee in his hand and, mercifully, disappears from view.

Finally.

Distraction gone, I manage to pull my attention back to the study notes in front of me. Nina Simone croons over the sound system as I lose myself in the books. But a handful of minutes later, movement at my peripheral vision drags my eyes back up again. He's back. And wonder of wonders, he's dressed—in an impeccably-tailored dark suit. I yank my eyes back to my notes, then back to him.

This time, he's finally gone.

I exhale slowly, swallowing as I drag my attention back to my government policy books. I don't have time for these distractions. Not when I've got two weeks of notes to memorize and *also* a Kildare family meeting in…

I glance at my phone and groan.

Shit. In, basically, now. As if on cue, the buzzer goes off for my front door. Sighing, I close the books and pad across the living room. I glance through the peephole out of habit. Then I grin and open the door wide.

Eilish's brows furrow as she looks me up and down.

"Neve, what the fuck. We're going to be late, and you're not even dressed?"

My brow scrunches as I glance down at myself.

"You need to get *dressed*, Neve," my younger sister sighs.

"I'm dressed!"

"Those look like pajamas."

"So? They're comfy." I raise my gaze past her to the tall guy standing behind her. "Cas, back me up here."

But Castle just shakes his sandy blonde head and lifts a muscled shoulder apologetically.

"Cillian wants you dressed properly, kid."

I roll my eyes at the word kid, but I let it go. Castle's been Eilish's and my —I suppose the word is "bodyguard"—for the last ten years. Growing up, all of our friends drooled over the six-and-a-half-foot tall, built-like-a-quarterback shadow that was always with us. That, or they were *sure* one of us was going to get scandalously tangled up in some steamy, x-rated tryst with him.

But, *no way*. No way to an "eww" degree. Yes, Castle is ridiculously handsome. But to Eilish and me he's always been the older brother we never had. And we're the perpetually annoying-but-loveable kid sisters *he* never had.

Which is why he can still get away with calling me “kid” or doing annoying big brother-type shit like messing up my hair even though I’m twenty-four.

I stick my bottom lip out, giving Castle my best puppy-dog eyes.

“But *Caaaastle*—”

“Enough with the waif eyes. Go get changed, Neve,” he grunts. “Your uncle isn’t exactly one to mince words, and he wants you dressed up.”

“But *why*? What’s this meeting even about?”

Eilish shrugs. “Beats me. Bet it has something to do with your new neighbor, though.”

Annoyed as I am to be forced to give up my sweatpants and hoodie, I know Castle well enough to know there’s no way he’s budging on this. And I know my Uncle Cillian well enough to know that one, there’s no wiggle room here, but more importantly two, there’s a reason he wants us looking sharp. Even if I have no idea what that reason is.

I root around in my disaster zone of a bedroom, stripping out of my hoodie and sweats and pulling on clean underwear and clothes. Five minutes later, I emerge in a green puff-sleeve top, black jeans, and heeled black boots, shoving my long red hair up in a loose ponytail.

Eilish, predictably, rolls her eyes.

“*That’s* dressed up?”

“I could go back to my extensive sweatpants collection, if you prefer.”

Eilish sighs, reaching up to smooth the single errant lock of blonde back behind her ear. She’s right. I’m still fairly casually dressed. Especially next to my princess of a little sister, who looks like a modern-day blonde Jackie-O in a pink Chanel jersey dress and heels, her hair and makeup immaculate. At *nine-thirty in the freaking morning*, no less. So sue me, this is the best I can do.

Finally, she grins as she rolls her eyes again.

“Okay, *okay*, fine. C’mon. We shouldn’t be late.”

“Hey, I’m not the one getting bent out of shape about the dress code.”

I glance to Castle for at least a chuckle. But he’s looking even more grim and stoic than usual.

“What’s up with you?”

He shrugs, turning away.

“Just don’t want to be late. C’mon.”

I frown. “Cas, seriously, what’s up?”

There’s a glint in his eye when he glances back at me for half a second. But still, he gives nothing away.

“Let’s get where we need to go, kid,” he murmurs quietly.

I shoot Eilish a puzzled look as we follow him out the door. But she just shakes her head and gives me an “I have no idea” face. Given that my sister is incapable of being anything but cheerful, talking shit about *anyone* no matter how terrible they are, or lying in any capacity, it’s clear she’s also in the dark.

Twenty minutes later, Castle is pulling the white armored Range Rover up to the curb outside O’Bannon’s. The midtown Irish pub has been our uncle’s temporary center of business and war room since he moved to New York from London a few months ago, after the petty scuffles between the Kildare family and the Drakos family turned into all-out war.

After things went nuclear, when the Drakos family lost Vasilis, their head of operations in New York, and we lost Declan, the head of ours.

Declan, as in, *my father*.

The side door to O’Bannon’s, which leads up to the second floor where Cillian’s been holding court the last few months, is guarded by four Kildare men with not-so-hidden bulges of sidearms under their dark jackets. One nods stiffly at Castle and goes to open the door to the bar for us, when suddenly there’s the sound of a car screeching to a stop at the curb behind us.

The hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle as I slowly turn to frown at the black Escalade. And when the back door opens, and a man in a dark suit with pure malice on his face steps out, my heart leaps into my throat.

"*RUN*!" I scream as I grab Eilish's arm, whirling to bolt into O'Bannon's before the bullets start flying.

Because I know damn well who the man who just stepped out of the SUV is. Hades Drakos: a dangerous, certifiable psychopath and second-in-command of the Drakos family. Basically, public enemy number two if your last name is Kildare.

As I yank my sister towards the door, I realize something odd: the guards aren't launching into action. Castle himself is just standing there, glowering at the second-oldest Drakos brother as he grins savagely at me.

"Cas?" I hiss hoarsely, my pulse thudding. Clearly, Eilish is just as out of the loop as I am, because she's still cowering behind me, shaking.

"It's okay, kid," Castle mutters quietly. He glances behind me, his look softening as it frequently does when it comes to Eilish. Which is totally understandable. I'm the sister with a chip on her shoulder and an axe to grind. Eilish is the sweet one. The one who's arguably *way* too soft for this dangerous world that we live in.

"But that's—!"

"*Boo*," Hades chuckles thinly, winking at me in a way that sends a shiver up my spine. He rolls his muscled shoulders, the tattoo ink that curls up from inside the collar of his dress shirt rippling as he buttons his jacket.

"Well, Pillow Fort. Can we go inside now?"

The creases in Castle's brow deepen as he squares off with Hades.

"It's Castle."

"I really don't give a shit. Are we doing this or not?"

I frown as I turn to Castle again.

"Doing *what*, Cas? What are we—"

“Open the doors.”

I stiffen at the deep, powerful voice that rumbles behind me. A voice that causes a tingling sensation to creep over my skin, electrifying me as deeply as it scares me. The feeling grows and throbs deeper and warmer, until I can feel my cheeks reddening as something wicked pools between my thighs.

I turn, and my core clenches tight.

It’s *him*.

My neighbor. The forbidden distraction. The man with the god-like body built for sin who I have no business fantasizing about, but God help me I do.

Because my neighbor isn’t just eye candy.

He’s *Ares fucking Drakos*, the brand-new king of the entire Drakos family.

I’m vaguely aware of more people getting out of a second and a third SUV that pull up behind the first—the other siblings in the Drakos family, and various other guards. As the seconds tick by, and as Ares’ piercing, dark-eyed gaze continues to stab right into me, the question of why he’s here fades into the background.

And the question of why he’s looking at me like he’s trying to figure out how to swallow me in one bite comes to the fore.

“Inside, all of you,” he growls quietly, his voice filled with unquestioned power. Two of his three brothers—Hades and Kratos—and his sister Calliope glance at me with slightly raised eyebrows as they file past me into O’Bannon’s. Their guards and the Kildare men follow.

Castle clears his throat, taking Eilish by the shoulders as if to escort her inside. I know I should go too. But somehow, I’m stuck. It’s as if my gaze is bound to Ares. Or as if *his* gaze has me pinned to the very pavement beneath my feet.

We’re on a busy New York sidewalk. And yet, it’s as if we’re suddenly in a bubble of silence. As if the entire rest of the world fades away to a low

hum, until I can actually hear my throat tightening when he starts to walk towards me.

I shiver when he stops right in front of me, looming over me. I want to sneer at him. Or spit on his fancy shoes. Or worse. But all I can do is purse my lips and glare at him.

Ares smirks down into my eyes.

“They haven’t told you yet, have they?”

I swallow.

“Told me *what*?”

One of his dark brows raises in amusement.

“Never mind. You’ll find out soon enough. You know who I am?”

“Of course I know who you are.”

“I mean, apart from being your neighbor.”

I stiffen, desperately trying to swallow back the heat from my face.

“Neighbor?” My voice cracks. Not badly, but enough. “I hadn’t realized.”

The dangerous and lethally-attractive man looming over me smiles ruthlessly, coldly.

“You don’t recognize me?”

“I—I guess not.”

“Would it help if I took my clothes off?”

Dear. GOD.

My face turns as hot as the sun as I pray for a sinkhole to open at my feet.

“I—I—”

“The meeting is about to start.”

He lets his lips curl slightly, giving me the faintest flash of white teeth. Then, without blinking, he starts to move past where I'm still glued to the sidewalk.

He pauses right next to me, and my breath sucks in as he leans down, so close I can smell the woodsy, elegant scent of his cologne and feel the heat of his breath in my ear.

"Oh, and Neve…" he growls quietly. "Peach isn't your color."

My brows knit as I start to turn towards him in confusion.

"I'm not wearing—"

Oh God.

Yes, I am.

My mind flashes back to rooting around in my light-filled bedroom as I yanked off my hoodie and sweatpants. Where I pulled out the green top and black jeans…

After putting on the laundry-day pair of peach-colored panties.

I'm not the only person spying on their neighbor.

Son of a bitch.

Ares clears his throat, straightening up and buttoning his jacket as I melt into a puddle of mortification.

"See you in there, princess."

Chapter 2
Ares

Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.

Everyone knows that. Except kings usually know they're going to *be* kings long before they take over the throne. They prepare for it their whole lives, train for it. They're ready when the day arrives.

I wasn't. Because I was never *meant* to be king. I'm Lancelot, burning and pillaging and fucking his way through the countryside. *Not* King fucking Arthur.

But life, or fate, or karma, or whatever you want to call it, had other plans for me.

Nine months ago, my father Aeneas, the head of the entire Drakos Family, died at the hands of my older brother, Atlas. My father was a hard, brutal man. But Atlas was unhinged. And power-hungry.

Not to mention a knuckle-dragging fucking idiot.

His "reign" lasted less than three weeks. Then he was killed waging a pointless war against a man with deep pockets and dangerous friends, all over a woman.

It's an absurd story. Years and years ago, Atlas had once been betrothed to this woman's mother, Saoirse —an Irish Mafia princess and Cillian Kildare's sister. But Saoirse ended up having a fling with someone else, producing a daughter, Rose—who went on to end up with this man with the deep pockets and dangerous friends.

Atlas decided the daughter of the bride he'd been cheated out of should be his. Obviously, the man with whom she lived and shared a bed disagreed. And when the dust had settled, my brother was dead, and I was king in his place.

Sometimes I'm convinced life really is a Greek tragedy.

Or a comedy, depending on how cynical you are.

But, heavy as the burden to lead is, I was born for this. All my siblings and I were. Living under our father's rule may have been a lesson in brutality and viciousness, but it hardened us. It prepared us to lead and to conquer. When I took the throne that was unexpectedly thrust upon me, I was ready.

And then, of course, life threw me another curveball.

My siblings and I were all born here in New York. But my father ultimately preferred England, where he'd grown up. So that's where the real seat of the

Drakos empire was for the last twelve years, while my uncle Vasilis oversaw our operations back here in New York City.

Until four months ago, when, as I say, the proverbial shit hit the proverbial fan.

Our family and the Irish Kildare family have never gotten along. There's generations of bad blood between us, going back who even remembers how long. At one point, there was at least a half-truce—when Saoirse was promised to Atlas. And even when that marriage fell through, things at least cooled off between our families for the next twenty years or so.

Until things went sideways, *badly*.

I've heard it started as a potential peace agreement. Vasilis sat down with Declan Kildare, Cillian's half-brother and the head of Kildare operations here in New York. But whatever "peace" they were trying to hammer out shattered when a gunfight broke out between them, killing them both.

It should mean all-out war. A bloodbath in the streets. The final showdown between the Kildare and Drakos families until only one is left standing.

Luckily, neither Cillian nor I is suicidal.

Cillian *is* a fucking psychopath, there's no question about that. He's been described more than once as the kind of man who wants to watch the world burn because he enjoys the smell of the smoke. And I think that's a fair assessment. But either out of self-interest or greed, we've managed to work out an arrangement.

It's time to settle this bullshit between our families once and for all.

And the key to settling it is currently glaring daggers at me from across the room. Clearly, nobody's told her yet. But she's it.

We're it.

My eyes narrow, my mouth tightening to a line as I let my gaze drag across the scowl on Neve Kildare's face.

It makes sense that she hates me. Even if neither of us had anything to do with the violence of a few months ago, at the end of the day, my uncle and

her father killed each other. From what I gather, neither she nor her sister Eilish was very close with Declan.

But still. Blood is blood.

And soon, *we'll* be blood.

Joined.

Bound together forever.

My jaw grinds as my mind flashes to other more literal ways I could bind the stunning and furious-looking redhead across the table from me.

My tempting, sinfully attractive neighbor who *really* ought to have some curtains put up in her bedroom.

The one who's been spying on me. The one *I've* been spying on right back. I'm just much better at it than she is.

Desire makes my cock swell as my mind flashes back to earlier today. When I was standing in my kitchen rinsing out my coffee cup, staring through the windows above my sink…

Into her *bedroom*. Where I watched her strip off her sweatpants and hoodie and prowl naked around her disaster of a room until she found some other clothes to pull on—

"You realize she's going to bite your dick off the first chance she gets, right?"

My jaw grinds and my train of thought is interrupted as I glance sideways at my younger brother, Hades, sitting next to me on our side of the conference table.

When we were kids, I used to roll my eyes at the way our father named all of us after Greek gods, titans, and muses—Atlas, Ares, Hades, Deimos, Kratos, and our sister, Calliope. But as we've gotten older, we've all weirdly grown into the mythological figures we were named for. Hades especially.

There’s a darkness and an edge in all of us—our father made damn sure of that with his heavy hand and strict discipline. But Hades—named for the god of the dead, the king of the underworld—always seems to revel in it. The sadistically sociopathic glint I can currently see in his eyes is a testament to that darkness.

He shrugs at my cold silence.

“You know I’m right.”

“What I know is this is neither the time nor the place, Hades,” I grunt back.

My brother shrugs again, pushing his longish hair back from his face. He got our mother’s piercing ice-blue eyes. I got our father’s dark, brooding ones.

Behind him and towering above all of us despite being younger than Hades and me, Kratos mimics my stern glare at our brother.

“It’s a good arrangement,” he rumbles in that mountainous way of his.

I nod to my brother. Kratos is a good, steady voice of reason. Though Deimos, who’s holding down the fort back in London, is the true peacekeeper of all of us siblings.

A peacekeeper in the style of a nuclear deterrent, that is, not Gandhi.

“Oh, I agree,” Hades smiles brittly. “It’s good for peace and will bring an end to bloodshed. I mean, it’s not *my* cock that’s going to get chewed off.”

“Could you *attempt* to not be a dick for just two minutes, Hades?”

I turn to smirk quietly at Calliope, my sharp-tongued little sister, sitting on my other side. The youngest and smallest of all of us, and yet somehow, she’s the law-keeper. She’s got our grandmother Dimitra’s genes.

Across the room, the group of Kildare men who’ve been talking quietly amongst themselves finally come find seats at the table. Cillian and I catch each other’s eyes, and we nod.

This wasn’t his idea, or mine. It was Dimitra who first put it forward: a way to put the hostilities between our families and our subsidiaries behind us for

good. As she pointed out, the closest we've ever gotten to peace before was when Atlas was set to marry Saoirse.

What better way to settle our differences than by becoming family?

But when I glance at Neve sitting across the table, still glaring pure malice at me, it's clear her uncle still hasn't told her what's about to happen.

This should be interesting.

Cillian clears his throat, sitting back in his seat as his green eyes slice across the room, silencing it with a look.

"I'm not one for fancy speeches, so I'll get straight to it. We're here because the hostilities between our organizations have reached an untenable level. Rivalries are one thing. But we've crossed too many lines, and there's too much blood in the streets."

He pulls a silver cigarette case out of his breast pocket, opens it, slips one between his lips, and lights it deftly with a flick of a silver Zippo. Smoke curls around the Irishman's head as his glinting green eyes pierce through it.

"I'm not going to get all weepy and sentimental. The truth is, the reason all of us are here is that war will mean ruin to both the Kildare and Drakos families. It will destroy our business interests. And there are already enough jackals circling, waiting for the first sign of weakness to strike. The Bolinaro Cartel. The Carveli Family. The Reznikov Bratva, not to mention their allies."

Cillian's icy gaze lands on me.

I don't blink.

"So in the interest of *not* getting hit from behind by an enemy while we bicker like schoolboys, Ares and I have come to an arrangement—one that will end these hostilities forever, and make both of our families stronger than ever as a united front."

I watch Neve's face scrunch up in confusion as she turns to frown at her uncle.

Oh, this is about to get good.

“A *united* front?”

Goddamnit, Ezio.

I frown quietly as I lean forward, turning to stab my gaze down the length of the table to where Ezio Adamos is glaring daggers at Cillian.

“Please, *go on* about this fucking *united* front we’re supposed to have with—”

“Ezio.”

My voice is neither raised nor very forceful. But it cuts through the room all the same, quickly silencing him. He stares at me, fury and pain boiling behind his eyes.

The Adamos family is a subsidiary, tributary family to ours. Their allegiance has been pledged to the Drakos family for generations, and the way I can see Ezio about to suicide bomb this entire discussion has my jaw grinding harshly.

But I get it. And I feel for him.

Ezio’s only son, Jason, was at the meeting where Vasilis Drakos and Declan Kildare opened fire.

He was also killed.

“Ares, *please*,” he hisses at me, pain glinting in his eyes. “You cannot seriously be considering allying ourselves with these backstabbing, honorless *Micks*—”

“*Be silent*,” I snap.

I’m not completely heartless. I understand he’s in pain. But this is decidedly *not* the place for it. Or the time for him to start hurling slurs.

Cillian clears his throat, eying Ezio across the table.

“What would…*ease* your grief?”

Fuck.

This isn’t Cillian being diplomatic.

This is him going for the throat, and Ezio’s about to walk right into his trap.

“What would *ease my fucking grief*?!” He snaps at the Irishman.

“I don’t believe I stuttered, Mr. Adamos. What’s the going rate on grief these days? Ten thousand? Twenty?”

Goddammit.

Ezio lurches to his feet, his face a mask of seething rage as he whips his head around to glare at me.

“This is insulting! I will *not* sit here—”

“Yes, you will.” My gaze hardens on him.

I’ll tell him again how sorry I am for his loss later. Not here.

“You. *Will*.”

His mouth thins to a line as he points a finger across the table at Cillian.

“This piece of shit *dares* to offer me *money*?! I lost a SON, Ares!”

“And I lost a fucking *brother*,” Cillian snaps coldly. “But here we are. And you can either get on board, or go find a nice length of rope somewhere and join your boy.”

Yeah, they’re not exaggerating when they call Cillian a sadistic sociopath.

The room goes silent. Ezio’s face turns purple. He looks like he’s seriously considering jumping across the table and murdering Cillian with his bare hands. But instead, he spins on his heel, glares at me viciously, and storms from the room.

“*Well, I have to say. This is TWICE as much fun as I imagined it would be*,” Hades mutters next to me.

Cillian sighs, drumming his fingers on the table as his gaze drags back to me.

“You need to keep your dogs on a tighter leash.”

“He’ll keep to the truce,” I growl back.

My eyes swivel to Neve again, drinking in her fiery red hair, the dusting of freckles across her nose, and the sharp green eyes so like her uncle’s, still squinting in confusion.

“And you?” I murmur, pulling my gaze from Neve to Cillian. “You’ll keep to our agreement?”

He takes a long, slow drag of his cigarette, and then nods slowly.

“We will.”

He turns to his niece, and my eyes lock onto her as well.

“Neve,” Cillian sighs. “There’s no easy way to say this. And if there was any other way…” he shrugs. “But there isn’t. Not one that doesn’t end in more blood.”

Her brow furrows deeper.

“Uncle, what are you talking about? And why am I—”

“You’re going to marry Ares Drakos, Neve. That will be the final truce to forever end this bullshit between our families.”

The room goes *silent*. Neve’s face turns white as she stares dumbfounded at her uncle. She blinks, frowning as if willing him to laugh at the spectacular joke he’s just made.

But this is no joke.

This is happening. And as reluctant and unhappy as *I* am about it, I’m guessing from the look of horror that spreads across her face that she’s twice as reluctant and unhappy.

“*What*?!”

Cillian takes one last pull from his smoke, exhaling toward the ceiling before dropping the butt in the mug of coffee in front of him.

“It’s the only way, Neve. You’re going to marry Ares, and that’s final.”

She blinks, shaking as her mouth forms silent words, none getting out.

“No—”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a discussion, Neve,” he says quietly, a flicker of regret and rare-for-Cillian apology on his face.

“Like hell it’s—!”

“*Neve*,” he growls thickly. “It’s. Been. Decided.”

Slowly, her face pale as a ghost, Neve turns to let her fierce green eyes stab into mine like knives.

I stare right back.

My little peeping Tom of a neighbor.

My enemy.

My wife.

“I think you’ll find, Neve, this is the best way to settle all of the bad blood—”

“And I think *you’ll* find yourself, *Ares*, with a knife in your throat if you come anywhere fucking near me.”

She stands abruptly, her eyes wild with fear and anger.

“Neve,” Cillian hisses quietly. “It’s *done*—”

“Oh, we’re done, all right.”

Without another word, she whirls, storms to the conference room doors, and blows right through them.

Shit.

“So,” Hades sighs, his voice dripping with amusement. “You ready to discuss body armor for your dick yet, or do you wanna talk bachelor party?”

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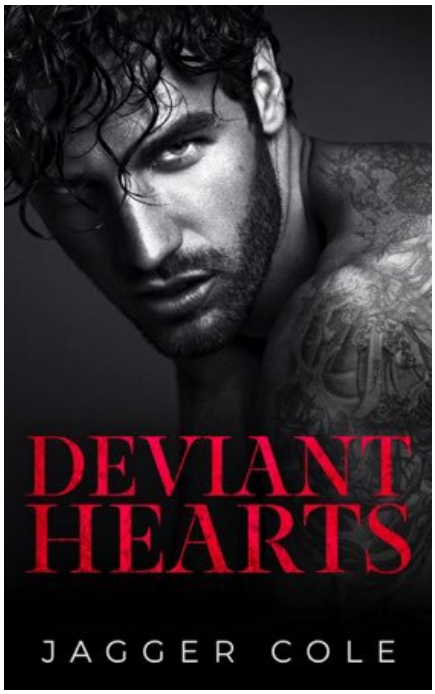

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A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

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